THE ISOLATED INDIVIDUAL IN THE

NOVELS OF CARSON MCCULLERS

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THE ISOLATED INDIVIDUAL IN THE
NOVELS OF CARSON McCULLERS

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All men are lonely. But sometimes it seems to me that we Americans are the loneliest of all.

Carson McCullers
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"The problem of human isolation is one of the great and pressing ones in American life and so is one of the great themes of the American novel."1

Early in the nineteenth century, a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, sensed a frightening tendency in American life. He wrote of the American individuals:

They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.

Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.2

The elevation of the individual, coupled with the growing complexity of modern life, has raised this problem of loneliness to paramount importance.

An American architect of the latter half of the nineteenth century perceived the same problem a bit differently. Louis Sullivan, the great Chicago architect and teacher of


2Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, translated by Henry Reeve (New York, 1900), II, 105-106.
Frank Lloyd Wright, saw the problem of isolation as arising from the innate incommunicability of man. In response to a student's question of how to make others understand the artist's concepts, Sullivan stated:

"You understand what you understand, and another understands what he understands—and that's a beginning and an end of it. There exists between you and every one of your fellow beings a chasm infinitesimally narrow, yet absolutely uncrossable. The heart cannot cross it, the soul cannot cross it; much less can words cross it. Thus do you, thus does every human being live in the solitude of isolation.... This isolation is unreachable and unescapable. It is for each one of us a dungeon, or a boundless universe according to the largeness or littleness of his soul."

Out of this boundless dungeon of isolation, a few artists have created great and representative works of art. "The American novel does not simply make use of the isolated man; it is 'about' the isolated man and isolation itself." Among numerous examples in American literature, a few creations stand out. Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Herman Melville's Moby-Dick, and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn are the most important novels of isolation of the nineteenth century. In numerous recent novels, this theme is dominant, for the modern writer has discovered the world to be a strangely alien place.

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4 Bowden, p. 3.
But the theme is by no means limited only to America. Since the close of World War II, the Existentialist movement in philosophy and literature has generated a popular concern for the theme of isolation. The writings of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jean Genet are indicative of this interest. This problem has come to the attention of philosophers, psychologists, and theologians, as well as novelists. Erich Fromm, in The Art of Loving, has written that: "The deepest need of man . . . is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness." In an essay entitled "Alienation under Capitalism," Fromm states that: "Alienation as we find it in modern society is almost total; it pervades the relationship of man to his work, to the things he consumes, to the state, to his fellow man, and to himself." David Riesman's sociological report, The Lonely Crowd, is a detailed study of alienation within the group, while Martin Buber's I and Thou is a description of how the individual is able to find meaning and escape isolation through a complete, personal relationship with another individual.

But it is among the authors of the American South that the theme of isolation has received its most intense and


poetic treatment. The development of this theme stems from Ellen Glasgow to Truman Capote, and the list is exhaustive. Though there is no cohesive school to speak of, a small group of authors appear most prominent: William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Tennessee Williams, and Carson McCullers have employed the theme of isolation to its best advantage. Faulkner's novels create "a world of grotesque exaggeration in which man's familiar isolation is enlarged to the point of symbolic horror." Williams constructs a world in which the weaker, perceptive individuals, those who are aware of their isolation, are devoured by the brutal, insensitive masses. And Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel is a detailed chronicle of the anguished cry of the isolated individual.

The intense isolation felt by the Southern author results, partially, from historical and geographical conditions. The lack of transportation facilities, the inability to switch from an agrarian society to an industrial one, the Southern attitude resulting from the loss of the Civil War, and the destruction of the old feudal society are important factors in the creation of an isolated society. But the primary cause of isolation is universal and is by no means limited to the South. Isolation results from the inability to form a deep and permanent relationship with others. It arises from the

7Bowden, p. 126.
modern predicament of man discovering himself in an alien
environment. The destruction of the old order has left man
with no replacement. Nietzsche radically proclaimed the death
of the gods, but then stopped to question fearfully, "Do we
not now wander through an endless Nothingness?"\textsuperscript{8}

This endless Nothingness of existence is explored by
Carson McCullers through the creation of her lonely, isolated
individuals.

\textsuperscript{8}Eric and Mary Josephson, introduction to \textit{Man Alone},
p. 15.
CHAPTER II

THE ISOLATED LIFE OF CARSON MCCULLERS

When I was a child of about four, I was walking with my nurse past a convent. For once the convent doors were open. And I saw the children eating ice cream cones, playing on iron swings, and I watched, fascinated. I wanted to go in, but my nurse said no, I was not Catholic. The next day, the gate was shut. But, year by year, I thought of what was going on, of this wonderful party, where I was shut out. I wanted to climb the wall, but I was too little. I beat on the wall once, and I knew all the time that there was a marvelous party going on, but I couldn't get in.

At the age of four, Carson McCullers knew the feeling of isolation. In her own childish way, she realized that she was lonely and would forever be a stranger to others. Caught in the mysterious flow of life, she was unable to understand why she was not permitted into a world that seemed far brighter than her own, and why she must remain alone on the outside. As a mature woman of forty-two, McCullers remembered this incident and recounted it as a significant, formative event.

Carson (Smith) McCullers was born on February 19, 1917, in Columbus, Georgia, and it was there that she spent her childhood and adolescence. This personal background is important, for McCullers states that: "The writer's work is

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predicated not only on his personality but by the region in which he was born. In a series of autobiographical articles appearing in Mademoiselle, Esquire and Vogue magazines, the isolated life of Carson McCullers can be traced from the age of four to the present. These years are important because they constitute the world out of which McCullers constructs her major work. She writes:

Many authors find it hard to write about new environments that they did not know in childhood. The voices reheard from childhood have a truer pitch. And the foliage—the trees of childhood—are remembered more exactly. When I work from within a different locale from the South, I have to wonder what time the flowers are in bloom—and what flowers? I hardly let characters speak unless they are Southern...No matter what the politics, the degree or non-degree of liberalism in a Southern writer, he is still bound to this peculiar regionalism of language and voices and foliage and memory.

Carson McCullers remembered the Christmas of her fifth year with a mixture of pleasant nostalgia, loneliness and guilt:

... I had just recovered from scarlet fever, and that Christmas day I overcame a rivalry that like the fever had mottled and blanched my sickened heart. This rivalry that changed to love overshadowed my discovery that Santa Claus and Jesus were not the kin I had supposed.

The scarlet fever weakened her physically, and the rivalry weakened her emotionally. The jealousy she felt for her

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3McCullers, p. 164.
4Ibid., p. 163.
5Carson McCullers, "The Discovery of Christmas," Mademoiselle, XXXVIII (December, 1953), 54.
baby sister, Bonny, caused the child Carson to commit an act
that she never forgot. During her illness the Negro nurse,
Rosa Henderson, told the children how her own baby had acci-
dently been left near the hearth and had burned to death.
McCullers remembers:

... I was sitting on the floor alone in the
Christmas room except for the baby in her play
pen. The bright tree glowed on the winter light.
Suddenly I thought of Rosa Henderson and the baby
who was burned on Christmas Day. I looked at
Bonny and glanced around the room. Mother and
Daddy had gone to visit my Uncle Will, and Mary
was in the kitchen. I was alone. Carefully I
lifted the baby and put her on the hearth. In
the unclear unconscious of five years old I did
not feel that I was doing wrong. I wondered if
the fire would pop and went to the back room with
my brother, sad and troubled. 6

But the baby was unharmed when Carson returned to the
room, and slowly the jealousy she had previously felt turned
to love. She had felt unwanted and sought to end her lone-
liness by destroying its cause. In this autobiographical
sketch, McCullers juxtaposed the warm and nostalgic remem-
brances of Christmas against possible violence and mental
isolation.

During this Christmas season she learned that Santa Claus
did not exist. She found the Christmas toys in a back room
and questioned her mother about them. She knew her mother
was lying and asked if even Jesus were real:

Momma put down her knitting. 'Santa Claus is
(toys and stores and Jesus is church.'

6Ibid., pp. 119-120.
This mention of church brought me thoughts of boredom, colored windows, organ music, restlessness. I hated church and Jesus, if church was Jesus. I loved only Santa Claus and he was not real.

Mother tried again: "Jesus is as the holy infant—like Bonny. The Christ child."

This was the worst of all.7

Through her eventual love of Bonny the questions were softened but never answered. The question of the existence of Jesus, and eventually of God, caused an uneasiness in the spiritual life of Carson McCullers that developed into what was to become an obsessive theme: the spiritual isolation of man.

A later Christmas was remembered by McCullers as a joyous time bounded on both sides by boredom and loneliness:

... I remember climbing up into the tree-house and sitting there alone for a long time ...

I did not want to talk with my brother. I was experiencing the first wonder about the mystery of Time. Here I was, on this August afternoon, in the treehouse, in the burnt, jaded yard, sick and tired of all our summer ways. I had read Little Women for the second time, Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates, Little Men and Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea. I had read movie magazines and even tried to read love stories in the Woman's Home Companion—I was so sick of everything.8

The preparations for Christmas took months. There was cooking to be done, gifts to be bought, and relatives to be visited. Months of work were all directed toward the glorification of one day, a day that did not last long enough for

7Ibid., p. 115.
young Carson. And when Christmas was over there was only disappointment and boredom to look forward to:

At twilight I sat on the front steps, jaded by too much pleasure, sick at the stomach and worn out. The boy next door skated down the street in his new Indian suit. A girl spun around on a crackling son-of-a-gun. My brother waved sparklers. Christmas was over. I thought of the monotony of Time ahead, unsolaced by the distant glow of paler festivals, the year that stretched before another Christmas—eternity.9

During her adolescence, Carson, the teenager, read widely and wrote novels and plays to entertain herself. With the help of her younger brother and sister, she produced the plays in the sitting room to an audience of one, her mother:

The repertory was eclectic, running from hashed-over movies to Shakespeare and shows I made up and sometimes wrote down in my nickel Big Chief notebooks. The cast was everlastingly the same—my younger brother, Baby Sister and myself.10

The actors, director and audience were rewarded with chocolate raisin cupcakes that had failed to rise, made by Lucille, the cook. The reward was always the same. These sitting room shows ended when Carson discovered the work of Eugene O'Neill one summer in the city library. She placed his picture on the mantle above the fireplace, and he became her inspiration:

By autumn I was writing a three-actor about revenge and incest—the curtain rose on a graveyard

9Ibid., p. 132.

10Carson McCullers, "How I Began to Write," Mademoiselle, XXVII (September, 1948), 191, 256.
and, after scenes of assorted misery, fell on a catafalque. The cast consisted of a blind man, several idiots and a mean old woman of one hundred years.11

The next play was called "The Fire of Life" and had two characters, Jesus and Friedrich Nietzsche, and was written in verses that rhymed. Nietzsche was the inspiration. A visiting Aunt after hearing the play commented, "Jesus? Well, religion is a nice subject anyway."12 But soon Carson began to tire of her play writing and of the Georgia town where she had lived all her life:

By that winter the family rooms, the whole town, seemed to pinch and cramp my adolescent heart. I longed for wanderings. I longed especially for New York. The firelight on the walnut folding doors would sadden me, and the tedious sound of the old swan clock. I dreamed of the distant city of skyscrapers and snow, and New York was the happy mise en scene of that first novel I wrote when I was fifteen years old. The details of the book were queer: ticket collectors on the subway, New York front yards—but by that time it did not matter, for already I had begun another journey. That was the year of Dostoevski, Chekov and Tolstoy—and there were the imitations of an unsuspected region equidistant from New York, Old Russia and our Georgia rooms, the marvelous solitary region of simple stories and the inward mind.13

In 1934, after graduation from Columbus High School, Carson left Columbus, Georgia, to go north and study music:

When I was seventeen I went to New York with the idea of going to classes at Columbia and at

11Ibid., p. 257.
12Ibid., p. 257.
13Ibid., p. 257.
Juilliard Institute. But on the second day I lost all my tuition money on a subway. I was hired and fired from various part-time jobs and went to school at night. But the city and the snow (I had never seen snow before) so overwhelmed me that I did no studying at all. In the spring I spent a great deal of time hanging around the piers and making fine schemes for voyages. The year after that, Story bought two of my short stories and I settled down to work in earnest.14

In 1937, at the age of twenty, Carson Smith married Reeves McCullers15 and moved to North Carolina; then in 1953, her husband died.16 The young girl who left Georgia in search of love and adventure was again alone. Her marriage was an unsuccessful attempt to escape isolation. To McCullers, loneliness was an everpresent reality:

It is a curious emotion, this certain homesickness I have in mind. With Americans, it is a national trait, as native to us as the roller-coaster or the jukebox. It is no simple longing for the hometown or the country of our birth. The emotion is Janus-faced; we are torn between a nostalgia for the familiar and an urge for the foreign and strange. As often as not, we are homesick most for the places we have never known.

All men are lonely. But sometimes it seems to me that we Americans are the loneliest of all.17

It is this loneliness for places never known that she referred to in the description of her first year in New York


17Carson McCullers, "Look Homeward, Americans," Vogue, XCVI (December 1, 1940), 74.
when she wrote that she "spent a great deal of time hanging around piers and making fine schemes for voyages." The exploration of new frontiers and the flight of the wanderer before pressing civilization are ideas well imbued in the American myth. This flight is characterized by the running away from a dreaded reality while in pursuit of a greater reality. It is a desire to intensify life through a quest for the unknown, a nostalgia for the infinite.

Today Carson McCullers lives in Nyack, New York, on Broadway Street. thirty miles from New York City. Tennessee Williams, a personal friend of McCullers, has given an account of her present life. The two of them were visiting on the island of Nantucket the summer of 1946. He was working on his play Summer and Smoke, and she was writing the play version of The Member of the Wedding. At the end of this summer McCullers became ill with a paralysis of her right arm.

"Carson's strength is enormous," Williams writes, "but primarily exists in her spirit. From 1947 to the present year [1961] she has been, as many interested in American writing know, a gallant invalid."

McCullers rents rooms, an arrangement suggested by Tennessee Williams when money was especially needed, in an old Victorian house whose backporch overlooks the Hudson. One

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18Who's Who in America.
arm hangs in a cast after three unsuccessful operations to relieve the paralysis, and she sometimes walks with a cane. She is cared for by a Negro servant who calls her "Sister." Her physical weakness is due to a weakened heart caused by a childhood bout with rheumatic fever and to three subsequent strokes before the age of twenty-nine. Writing is difficult, though she attempts to write a few hours every day. When asked about her preference for writing she commented, "I'd rather be a writer than a pinhead in the circus. Their work is harder and has fewer rewards."20

The isolated real life of Carson McCullers is reflected in the intense isolation felt by the characters in her novels. The reality of her own isolation intensified by her artistic imagination produces a literary world of almost total estrangement:

It is only with imagination and reality that you get to know the things a novel requires. Reality alone has never been that important to me ... what is more intimate than one's own imagination? The imagination combines memory with insight, combines reality with dream.21

Imagination, reality, insight, dream and memory converge in Carson McCullers to form and create a literary world of lonely characters engaged in a fruitless search for the unknown. As McCullers admits, "Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes."22

22 Ibid., p. 163.
CHAPTER III

THE ISOLATED INDIVIDUAL IN THE

HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter was the first novel of Carson McCullers. It was completed at the age of twenty-two and was published in 1941. She began writing the novel two years earlier while living in North Carolina shortly after her marriage to Reeves McCullers. The publication of this novel marks the beginning of McCullers' long journey of exploration into the recesses of the lonely human heart.

The novel was received with mixed reactions. Most of the critics praised it, primarily because the author was only twenty-two, and because it was a first novel. Robert Littell of the Yale Review called it "a queer sad book that sticks in the mind." 1 Clifton Fadiman criticized the unreality of the characters: "The author's characters—most of whom are slightly or thoroughly cracked—do not add up to a group portrait of a Southern town." 2 Fadiman knew that the novel was a parable, and yet he did not apply that fact of the characterization to his criticism.


2 Clifton Fadiman, "Books," New Yorker, XVI (June 8, 1940), 69.
In contrast, Current Biography praised McCullers' characterization:

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter has a cool power and violence rare in so young a writer's work; it shows a precociously exact command of significant incident; and its characters as a group are much superior to the symbolic theme the author wishes upon them. 3

Tennessee Williams answered the critics' charges of grotesqueness and decadence:

Doubtless there were some critics, as well as readers, who did not understand why Carson McCullers had elected to deal with a matter so unwholesome as the spiritual but passionate attachment that existed between a deaf-mute and a half-wit. But the tenderness of the book disarmed them. The depth and nobility of its compassion were so palpable that at least for the time being the charge of decadence had to be held in check. 4

Spiritual isolation is the dominant theme of The Heart is a Lonely Hunter. Individual isolation, loneliness and alienation are pervasive and recurrent elements in this continuous, unbroken theme. Every portion of the novel—characterization, plot, description and symbolism—serve to intensify this feeling of isolation. The entire unit, the novel as a whole, is an overpowering statement on the alienation of modern man. Each of the characters is an outcast, set apart from others and unable to fathom the depths of himself, yet zealously desiring to communicate his feelings. 5


4 Tennessee Williams, introduction to Reflections in a Golden Eye (New York, 1961), op. ix-x.

5 Catherine Hughes, "A World of Outcasts," Commonweal, LXXV (October 13, 1961), 73.
It is a terrifying, pitiful picture of modern life in which all individuals remain isolated behind the walls of self.

The description of the setting reflects the loneliness of its inhabitants:

The town was in the middle of the deep South. The summers were long and the months of winter cold were very few. Nearly always the sky was a glassy, brilliant azure and the sun burned down riotously bright. Then the light, chill rains of November would come, and perhaps later there would be frost and some short months of cold. The winters were changeable, but the summers always were burning hot. The town was a fairly large one. On the main street there were several blocks of two- and three-story shops and business offices. But the largest buildings in the town were the factories, which employed a large percentage of the population. These cotton mills were big and flourishing and most of the workers in the town were very poor. Often in the faces along the streets there was the desperate look of hunger and of loneliness.6

This appearance of hunger and loneliness is sharply revealed in the five major characters: Mick Kelly, an adolescent girl trapped in a world not of her own choosing; Biff Brannon, a cafe owner who befriends the lonely and the freakish; Dr. Copeland, a disillusioned Negro doctor hopelessly fighting for the rights of his people; Jake Blount, a violent and frustrated anarchist; and John Singer, a deaf mute who becomes all things to the other four.

Singer was the central character of the novel, for around him all the other major characters revolved. It has been

6Carson McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter (Boston, 1940), p. 6.
suggested by more than one critic that he was a god-like figure. He was the central love object of the other four characters. All were searching desperately for love but were unable to find physical expression. These four lonely and isolated people sought out Singer as one to whom they could communicate and one from whom they received a silent, spiritual assurance.\(^7\)

The creation of this central character was described by the author:

For a whole year I worked on The Heart is a Lonely Hunter without understanding it at all. Each character was talking to a central character, but why, I didn't know. I'd almost decided that the book was no novel, that I should chop it up into short stories. But I could feel the mutilation in my body when I had that idea, and I was in despair. I had been working for five hours and I went outside. Suddenly, as I walked across a road, it occurred to me that Harry Minovitz, the character all the other characters were talking to, was a different man, a deaf mute, and immediately the name was changed to John Singer. The whole focus of the novel was fixed and I was for the first time committed with my whole soul to The Heart is a Lonely Hunter.\(^8\)

Although John Singer was the central character upon whom all the others relied, he was forced to rely upon another.

The novel began:

In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together. Early every morning they

\(^7\) Oliver Evans, "The Theme of Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCullers," New World Writing, I (New York, April 1952), 298.

\(^8\) Carson McCullers, "The Flowering Dream," p. 162.
would come out from the house where they lived and walk arm in arm down the street to work. The two friends were very different. The one [Spiros Antonapoulos] who always steered the way was an obese and haggard Greek. In the summer he would come out wearing a yellow or green polo shirt stuffed sloppily into his trousers in front and hanging loose behind. When it was colder he wore over this a shapeless gray sweater. His face was round and oily, with half-closed eyelids and lips that curved in a gentle, stupid smile. The other mute [John Singer] was tall. His eyes had a quick, intelligent expression. He was always immaculate and very soberly dressed.9

Spiros Antonapoulos, the only friend of John Singer, was pictured as a moron and a complete atavism:

Antonapoulos set back lazily and looked at Singer. It was seldom that he ever moved his hands to speak at all—and then it was to say that he wanted to eat or to sleep or to drink. These three things he always said with the same vague, fumbling signs. At night, if he were not too drunk, he would kneel down before his bed and pray awhile. Then his plump hands shaped the words 'Holy Jesus,' or 'God,' or 'Darling Mary.' These were the only words Antonapoulos ever said. Singer never knew just how much his friend understood of all the things he told him. But it did not matter.10

In the companionship of Antonapoulos, Singer sought an escape from loneliness. He deluded himself into thinking that the Greek understood the long soliloquies of sign language. Then one day, after they had been together for ten years, Antonapoulos became ill and was sent away to an institution. For Singer, the months began to pass in an "empty, dreaming

10Ibid., p. 4.
way....In his half-dreams he saw his friend very vividly, and when he awakened a great aching loneliness would be in him. 11 Singer then moved into a room in the Kelly boarding house, the room that was to become a haven of escape for the other characters. "But still he wandered through the streets of the town, always silent and alone." 12

At this point the action of the novel began, and the other characters were introduced. Singer was very lonely, and he recognized this loneliness in others:

A change came over Singer. Often he went out for the long walks that had occupied him during the months when Antonopoulos was first gone. These walks extended for miles in every direction and covered the whole of the town. He rambled through the dense neighborhoods along the river that were more squalid than ever since the mills had been slack this winter. In many eyes there was a look of somber loneliness. 13

After Antonopoulos was placed in an institution, Singer was forced to mingle with a few of the townspeople. As he began to mix quietly among them, they noticed him and recognized a kinship between his longing and theirs:

So the rumors about the mute were rich and varied. The Jews said that he was a Jew. The merchants along the main street claimed he received a large legacy and was a very rich man. It was whispered in one browbeaten textile union that the mute was an organizer for the C. I. O. A lone Turk who had roamed into the town years

11IBid., p. 11.
12IBid., p. 12.
13IBid., p. 196.
ago and who languished with his family behind
the little store where they sold linens claim-
ed passionately to his wife that the mute was
Turkish. He said that when he spoke his lan-
guage the mute understood. And as he claimed
this his voice grew warm and he forgot to
squabble with his children and he was full of
plans and activity. One old man from the coun-
try said that the mute had come from somewhere
near his home and that the mute's father had
the finest tobacco crop in all the country.
All these things were said about him.

During the moonlit January nights Singer
continued to walk about the streets of the
town each evening when he was not engaged.
The rumors about him grew bolder. An old
Negro woman told hundreds of people that he
knew the ways of spirits come back from the
dead. A certain piece-worker claimed that he
had worked with the mute at another mill some-
where else in the state—and the tales he told
were unique. The rich thought that he was rich
and the poor considered him a poor man like
themselves. And as there was no way to dis-
prove these rumors they grew marvelous and very
real. Each man described the mute as he wished
him to be.14

Singer became all things to all men, but his loneliness
did not lessen. He longed even more for his mute friend:

Antonapoulos! Within Singer there was al-
ways the memory of his friend. At night when
he closed his eyes the Greek's face was there
in the darkness—round and oily, with a wise
and gentle smile. In his dreams they were al-
ways together.

This was the Antonapoulos who now was al-
ways in his thoughts. This was the friend to
whom he wanted to tell things that had come
about. For something had happened in this year.
He had been left in an alien land. Alone. He
had opened his eyes and around him there was
much he could not understand. He was bewildered.15

14 Ibid., pp. 190, 221.
15 Ibid., pp. 198, 202.
Singer accepted the friendship of the four as a replacement for Antonapoulos and as an escape from loneliness:

The four people had been coming to his rooms now for more than seven months. They never came together—always alone. And invariably he met them at the door with a cordial smile. The want for Antonapoulos was always with him—just as it had been the first months after his friend had gone—and it was better to be with any person than to be too long alone.

At first he had not understood the four people at all. They talked and they talked—and as the months went on they talked more and more. He became so used to their lips that he understood each word they said. And then after a while he knew what each one of them would say before he began, because the meaning was always the same. 16

The four discovered Singer as one who understood their problems, and they treated him as an object of their love. But the friendship of the others was not enough for the mute. In a long letter to Antonapoulos beginning, "My Only Friend," Singer described the four people:

They come up to my room and talk to me until I do not understand how a person can open and shut his or her mouth so much without being weary. (However, the New York Cafe owner is different—he is not just like the others....He watches. The others all have something they hate. And they all have something they love more than eating or sleeping or wine or friendly company. That is why they are always so busy.) 17

And then he confessed: "The way I need you is a loneliness I cannot bear. . . . I am not meant to be alone and without you who understand." 18 Because of the unavoidable selfishness

16 Ibid., p. 203.  
17 Ibid., p. 212.  
18 Ibid., pp. 214-215.
of the others, Singer was forced to live entirely within himself. He had no one to talk to and no one to love. To the others, he was a source of communication and to Mick Kelly, he was a god.

Mick Kelly was an adolescent girl whose world was drab and lonely. She was tall for her age, her hair was cropped short, and she would have preferred being a boy. The daughter of an unemployed watch repairman and a boarding house keeper, she lived primarily in a dream world where her musical desires were fulfilled. Mick wanted to learn to play the piano and to compose music, but the family could afford neither lessons nor piano. At night she hid in the neighbor's shrubbery to hear the music on the radio. She composed songs in her head, but was frustrated because she could not write them down. She had few friends and was not "a member of any bunch."

As an adolescent, Mick Kelly was at an age when the sense of spiritual isolation was great. This in-between age acted as a barrier; she was no longer a child, but not yet an adult. Biff Brannon described Mick as being "at the age when she looked as much like an overgrown boy as a girl." 19 "Adolescents do not 'belong' anywhere, and they constitute excellent symbols of spiritual loneliness," 20 says Oliver Evans.

19 Ibid., p. 131.
20 Ibid., p. 302.
Portia, the Negro maid, understood that Mick was lonely and that the girl was in search of some meaningful and tangible entity. She warned Mick:

But you haven't never loved God nor even hair person. You hard and tough as cowhide. But just the same I knows you. This afternoon you going to roam all over the place without never being satisfied. You going to traipse all around like you haves to find something lost. You going to work yourself up with excitement. Your heart going to beat hard enough to kill you because you don't love and don't have peace. And then some day you going to bust loose and be ruined. Won't nothing help you then.21

The maid diagnosed the problem of all the characters in the novel, for all were engaged in a search for spiritual meaning. Their quest was endless, and they were never satisfied, for none of them had the ability to give and receive love. They were incomplete characters whose lives, as Portia says, will end in ruin. The reader cannot help but perceive the analogy. All men are incomplete, for the novel does not contain a single complete character. Perfection is not a quality of mortality; thus all men must, as Thomas Wolfe said, "remain strangers, forever and alone."

Mick roamed the neighborhood with a growing hunger that she could not fill:

Mick sat on the steps a long time. Miss Brown did not turn on her radio and there was nothing but the noises that people made. She thought a long time and kept hitting her thighs.

21Ibid., p. 50.
with her fists. Her face felt like it was scattered in pieces and she could not keep it straight. The feeling was a whole lot worse than being hungry for any dinner, yet it was like that. I want—I want—I want—was all that she could think about—but just what this real want was she did not know. 22

In search of an unknown thing, an unexplainable mystery, Mick turned to Singer for an answer. She climbed to the top of the stairs and waited outside his room to see him:

The hot afternoon passed slowly and Mick still sat on the steps by herself. The fellow Mozart's music was in her mind again. It was funny, but Mister Singer reminded her of this music. She wished there was some place where she could go to hum it out loud. Some kind of music was too private to sing in a house cram full of people. It was funny, too, how lonesome a person could be in a crowded house. Mick tried to think of some good private place where she could go and be by herself and study about this music. But though she thought about this a long time she knew in the beginning that there was no good place. 23

The "better place" does not refer merely to this Southern town but to the entire world. Like the young Carson McCullers who tried to force her way into the Catholic school because it seemed to be a brighter place, Mick was attempting to find a "better place" that she already knew did not exist. The loneliness in the crowded boarding house was the loneliness of the individual in a world of other lonely and indifferent individuals.

22 Ibid., p. 52.

23 Ibid., p. 23.
But Mick continued to deceive herself and looked to Singer as her salvation:

It was like he was some kind of a great teacher, only because he was a mute he did not teach. In the bed at night she planned about how she was an orphan and lived with Mister Singer—just the two of them in a foreign house where in the winter it would snow.24

She made a god of Singer, and to her, in essence, he was God:25

Now she felt good. She whispered some words out loud: 'Lord forgiveth me, for I knoweth not what I do.' Why did she think of that? Everybody in the past few years knew there wasn't any real God. When she thought of what she used to imagine was God she could only see Mister Singer with a long, white sheet around him. God was silent—maybe that was why she was reminded. She said the words again, just as she would speak them to Mister Singer: 'Lord forgiveth me, for I knoweth not what I do.'26

A visit to Singer's room was viewed by Mick as an experience of mutual understanding. An inward world was created into which she retreated in order to escape the disappointments of the outer world. In Mick's eyes the deaf mute shared her appreciation for music: in reality, Singer had no concept of music. "She likes music. I wish I knew what it is she hears. I am deaf but she thinks I know about music."27

24Ibid., p. 241.


26McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, p. 119.

27Ibid., p. 213.
Mick was subconsciously deceiving herself into thinking that some form of relationship existed.

She realized that others are lonely too. Her father was ill and unemployed and attempted to earn a little money by repairing watches in his home. One evening he tried to talk to Mick, but both of them sat and stared at each other in silence unable to say a word:

That was when she realized about her Dad. It wasn't like she was learning a new fact—she had understood it all along in every way except with her brain. Now she just suddenly knew about her Dad. He was lonesome and he was an old man . . . in his lonesomeness he wanted to be close to one of his kids—and they were all so busy that they didn't know it. He felt like he wasn't much real use to anybody.28

They talked, and "yet for some reason she couldn't tell him about the things in her mind—about the hot, dark nights."29

Mick's inability to communicate with another vocal person drove her to search out the wute, Singer, and to him she poured out her thoughts.

Biff Brannon, the owner of the New York Cafe, was less reliant upon Singer than were the other three characters. His all-night cafe was a meeting spot for all of them, but it was as dreary and lonely a place as the rest of the town. Often at night

. . . there was no noise or conversation, for each person seemed to be alone. The mutual

Distrust between the men who were just awakened and those who were ending a long night gave everyone a feeling of estrangement.

Biff and his wife, Alice, lived in a room above the cafe; she worked days, he, nights. Their marriage was a sort of death in life, an empty ritual without affection. When Alice died, Biff was not heartbroken. In fact, he seemed relieved.

Once Alice accused Biff of being a freak, and in a sense he was one. He was both male and female. His body was masculine, yet many of his actions were feminine. He decorated his room with a feminine touch and used his wife's perfume and toiletries. On his little finger he wore a woman's wedding ring. Biff explained:

By nature all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means.

The proof? Real youth and old age. Because often old men's voices grow high and reedy and they take on a mincing walk. And old women sometimes grow fat and their voices get rough and deep and they grow dark little mustaches.

Biff's love for Nick was a mixture of maternal and paternal elements. She was unaware of his feeling. Often he gave her candy or a soda, though he would rather have given her something real. All that he wanted for himself was to give.

When he thought about his feelings toward her, his

... mouth hardened. He had done nothing wrong but in him he felt a strange guilt. Why? The dark guilt in all men, unreckoned and without a name.

\[30\] Ibid., p. 30.
\[31\] Ibid., p. 131.
\[32\] Ibid., p. 231.
Throughout the novel Biff remained somewhat aloof from the others. He understood that he was alone:

And he was nobody but—Bartholomew—old Biff with two fists and a quick tongue—Mister Brannon—by himself. 33

Isolated, alone, "by himself," Biff played the role of an uncommitted observer trying to penetrate and understand the mystery of each of the patrons of his cafe. He could have been for them another Singer, if, like Singer, he had not been able to talk or disagree. But the others preferred Singer, for he was patient and always gave silent reassurance.

After Alice's death, Biff was left alone to run the cafe. Actually he had been isolated, even with Alice, since he became impotent. This sudden loss of masculinity was not explained, though one gathers that the cause was psychological rather than organic. Left alone, Biff had time to think, and old memories clouded his mind. Alice's death made his own isolation seem more real, and sometimes in the afternoons he sat alone in his room musing over the problem. On one occasion, as he sank deeper in thought and as the evening grew darker, the most suppressed of all questions began to trouble him:

Death. Sometimes he could almost feel it in the room with him. He rocked to and fro in the chair. What did he understand? Nothing.

33 Ibid., p. 33.
Where was he headed? Nowhere. What did he want? To know. What? A meaning. Why? A riddle.34

Biff asked himself the ultimate question about the meaning of life, and his isolation was deepened because he could not answer it. Because of his physical and spiritual impotence, he was unable to form a mutual love relationship, his only hope of escape from isolation. He was trapped within the walls of his own loneliness.

Singer was less important to Biff than to the others. Biff realized that:

Blount and Mick made of him a sort of home-made God. Owing to the fact he was a mute they were able to give him all the qualities they wanted him to have.35

Like Mick, Jake Blount sought out Singer for a one-sided communication and deified him. One morning, while preparing her Sunday school lesson, Alice quarrelled with Biff, calling both him and Jake freaks. The text of the lesson was "All men seek for Thee," the biblical response of the disciples as they gathered to Jesus. Biff thought of Singer and Blount in this context:

The poor son-of-a-bitch talking and talking and not ever getting anybody to understand what he meant. Not knowing himself, most likely. And the way he gravitated around the deaf-mute and picked him out and tried to make him a free present of everything in him.

Why?

34Ibid., p. 235.

Because in some men it is in them to give up everything personal at some time, before it ferments and poisons—throw it to some human being or some human idea. They have to. In some men it is in them—The text is 'All men seek for Thee.'

From the first, Jake Blount was attracted to Singer's silent acceptance and God-like sagacity. To Jake, Singer's eyes made a person think that he heard things nobody else had ever heard, that he knew things no one had ever guessed before. He did not seem quite human.

Jake was a labor organizer and an anarchist, though he was neither a communist nor a member of any other organized group. He saw himself as a messiah to the common man, yet he had no followers. A "loner" and a vagabond, Jake was isolated from society by his own views. During lengthy tirades he poured out his radical ideas to Singer who silently listened but neither accepted nor rejected them. Jake felt that "It was a queer thing to want to talk with a deaf-mute. But he was lonesome."

During one of these visits Jake explained to Singer that only a few men can know or understand the truth. Jake felt that he and Singer were the only two in the town who did understand:

Of all the places he had been this was the loneliest town of all. Or it would be without Singer.

36 Ibid., p. 32.

37 Ibid., p. 24.

38 Ibid., p. 64.
Only he and Singer understood the truth. He knew and could not get the don't-knows to see. "But say a man does know. [Jake explained] He sees the world as it is ... the main thing he sees is that the whole system of the world is built on a lie. And although it's as plain as the shining sun—the don't-knows have lived with that lie so long they just can't see it." 39

But Jake was wrong, for his mute friend did not understand. In the letter to Antonopoulos, Singer wrote:

"The one with the mustache I think is crazy.... He will shake his fist and say ugly drunken words that I would not wish you to know about. He thinks he and I have a secret together but I do not know what it is." 40

Because so few were able to perceive the "truth," Jake was unable to fully communicate with anyone. His isolation was almost total. "The loneliness in him was so keen that he was filled with terror." 41

Jake's most disastrous attempt at communication was a pitiful example of the inability of man to break down the barriers of isolation. Singer introduced Jake to Dr. Copeland, and the latter two began to discuss their idealistic views of society. The meeting was a disaster from the beginning. Neither of them was willing to compromise his position for the sake of discussion, and Dr. Copeland was too aware of Jake being a white man. The voices rose in heated debate, and Jake began shouting obscenities. The discussion reached an emotional

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39Ibid., pp. 150-151.
40Ibid., pp. 212-213.
41Ibid., p. 152.
peak when Dr. Copeland advised: "Do not attempt to stand alone.... The most fatal thing a man can do is try to stand alone." 42

Dr. Copeland was a medical doctor and the only educated Negro in the town. He had no one to talk to, for none of the Negroes understood him, and he was suspicious of all white men. In his own eyes his life was a failure. He failed as a father because he wanted his children to be better educated than the rest of the Negro community. His eccentric and unyielding views caused the disruption of the family. His wife, Daisy, and the three children left, and Dr. Copeland remained at the house alone. The only child that would visit him was his only daughter, Portia, the maid at the Kelly boarding house. Dr. Copeland realized his failure, and one evening Portia confessed to him:

Everybody is scared of you. It sure would take a whole lot of gin to get Hamilton or Buddy or Willie or my Highboy to come in this house and sit with you like I does. Willie say he remember you when he were only a little boy and he were afraid of his own father then.

Everybody has feelings—no matter who they is—and nobody is going to walk in no house where they certain their feelings will be hurt. You the same way. I seen your feelings injured too many times by white peoples not to know that. 43

By his actions and ideas, Dr. Copeland isolated himself from his children and from his people. Once Portia invited

42 Ibid., p. 300.
43 Ibid., p. 77.
him to attend a family reunion, and he promised to come though he knew the meeting would be painful. As he sat among the relatives:

A hush fell on the room. Doctor Copeland jerked the cuff of his sleeves and cleared his throat. His pulse beat too fast and his throat was tight. Sitting in the corner of the room he felt isolated and angry and alone.

He sat in rigid silence, and at last he picked up his hat and left the house without a farewell. If he could not speak the whole long truth no other word would come to him.44

By accident, Dr. Copeland met John Singer and trusted him as he had never trusted any white man. During times of frustration and anxiety, Dr. Copeland

... remembered the white man's face when he smiled behind the yellow match flame on that rainy night—and peace was in him.45

The morning following the ordeal of the family reunion, he went to Singer's room to talk:

The visit blunted the feeling of loneliness in him so that when he said good-bye he was at peace with himself once more.

... Often he talked to Mr. Singer. With him he spoke of chemistry and the enigma of the universe. Of the infinitesimal sperm and the cleavage of the ripened egg. Of the complex million-fold division of the cells. Of the mystery of living matter and the simplicity of death. And also he spoke with him of race.46

44Ibid., pp. 145, 147.

45Ibid., p. 89.

46Ibid., pp. 147, 139.
Like Mick and Jake, Dr. Copeland sought out Singer as a sounding board and deceived himself into thinking that the mute understood and communicated. The doctor thought of himself as a teacher of his people, but the Negroes did not understand:

He would tell them in simple words, always the same way, and with the years it came to be a sort of angry poem which he had always known by heart.

And he would give and explain and give and tell them. And then deliver maybe two scores times a week. Madyben and Benny Mae.

All of his life he knew that there was a reason for his working. He always knew that he was meant to teach his people.47

Singer seemed to be the only person that understood.

For years Dr. Copeland tried to make his people understand. Every Christmas he gave a party during which he explained his ideas to the Negroes. He told them about equality and about the slavery they were still forced to endure. He explained the importance of education and told them of the ideas of Karl Marx:

To teach and exhort and explain to his people—and to have them understand. That was the best of all. To speak the truth and be attended.48

But they did not understand. After the party the only closing comment from one of his people was, "Us certainly have had one fine time at this party."49

47Ibid., pp. 73-74.  
48Ibid., p. 193.  
49Ibid., p. 193.
Dr. Copeland was thrust into even greater isolation by the realization that he had been ignored:

How much that he had said today was understood? How much would be of any value? He recalled the words he had used, and they seemed to fade and lose their strength. The words left unsaid were heavier on his heart. They rolled up to his lips and fretted them. The faces of his suffering people moved in a swelling mass before his eyes. And as he steered the automobile slowly down the street his heart turned with this angry, restless love.50

Though the old doctor was dying of tuberculosis, he fought to educate his people. After his failure to communicate with Jake, and after the death of Singer, Dr. Copeland finally realized that no one would ever understand. His health failed, and he resigned himself to death.

In desperation each character turned to Singer for understanding. Each met with him alone as if to give confession. Late in the novel all four came together, by accident, with Singer in the boarding house room:

Singer was bewildered. Always each of them had so much to say. Yet now that they were together they were silent. When they came in he had expected an outburst of some kind. In a vague way he had expected this to be the end of something. But in the room there was only a feeling of strain.51

Their suspicions, prejudices and selfish interests kept them apart and made of them a society of collective isolation.

They were brought together in a sort of spiritual communion

50 Ibid., p. 195.
51 Ibid., p. 206.
of searchers with Singer at the center. None of the four suspected that the center was a void.

Late in August, 1939, Singer made his last visit to Antonapoulous. When he arrived at the hospital, he was told that the Greek had died. Singer became despondent and returned home:

He returned to his room with swollen eyes and an aching head. After resting he drank a glass of iced coffee and smoked a cigarette. Then when he had washed the ash tray and the glass he brought out a pistol from his pocket and put a bullet in his chest.52

Singer's suicide is an act of total isolation. Without the love and understanding of his Greek friend, Singer found life unbearable. Carson McCullers has commented that Singer is as much a symbol of isolation as he is a realistic character:

The fact that John Singer, in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, is a deaf-and-dumb man is a symbol... The deaf mute Singer is a symbol of infirmity, and he loves a person who is incapable of receiving his love. Symbols suggest the story and theme and incident, and they are so interwoven that one cannot understand consciously where the suggestion begins.53

John Singer was a hollow man who was so alone that he was forced to rely upon a moron. The four are deceived because Singer is a fake, and Singer is deceived because Antonapoulos is a fake. But Singer had something that the

52Ibid., p. 323.

others did not have, the ability to love. And for this reason, they were attracted to Singer. All wanted to be loved, but none had the power to love. Suicide was the only course left to Singer. His only friend died, and with him Singer lost all hope of communication. Dr. Copeland, Jake, Mick, and Miff had never been real friends or communicants to Singer, yet the mute's death was to profoundly affect each of them.

Dr. Copeland, sick and dying, was being sent, much against his will, to the country to die among the relatives he hated. He could not understand Singer's death:

But truly with the death of that white man a dark sorrow had lain down in his heart. He had talked to him as to no other white man and had trusted him. And the mystery of his suicide had left him baffled and without support. There was neither beginning nor end to this sorrow. Nor understanding. Always he would return in his thoughts to this white man who was not insolent or scornful but who was just. And how can the dead be truly dead when they still live in the souls of those who are left behind?  

While rocking in his chair, Dr. Copeland pondered the question. His daughter hurried him aboard the mule-drawn wagon to leave for the country, and he realized that his life was wasted and incomplete:

The notion of the wagon jolted his back. He looked up at the branches overhead, and then when there was no shade he covered his face with a handkerchief to shield his eyes from the sun. It was not possible that this could be the end.

Always he had felt in him the strong, true purpose. For forty years his mission was his life and his life was his mission. And yet all remained to be done and nothing was completed.

He felt the fire in him and he could not be still. He wanted to sit up and speak in a loud voice—yet when he tried to raise himself he could not find the strength. The words in his heart grew big and they would not be silent. But the old man had ceased to listen and there was no one to hear him.55

And the old, black grandfather, unaware of the turmoil inside his son-in-law, Dr. Copeland, shouted a mournful and poetic line that intensifies the irony of man's absurd existence: "Git, Lee Jackson. Git, Honey. Pick up your feet and quit this here poking. Us got a long way to go."56

When he heard of Singer's death, Jake went to see Dr. Copeland, but the old Negro had already left for the country. Then Jake realized the mistakes that he and Copeland had made and how precious communication could be. He realized that 'Copeland 'Knew.' And those who knew were like a handful of naked soldiers before an armed battalion."57 Then Jake was completely alone. His last hope of communication was shattered. Copeland was gone and:

Singer was dead. And the way he had felt when he first heard that he had killed himself was not sad—it was angry. He was before a wall. He remembered all the innermost thoughts that he

55Ibid., pp. 333-334.
56Ibid., p. 334.
57Ibid., p. 240.
had told to Singer, and with his death it seemed to him that they were lost. And why had Singer wanted to end his life? Maybe he had gone insane. But anyway he was dead, dead, dead. He could not be seen or touched or spoken to, and the room where they had spent so many hours had been rented to a girl who worked as a typist. He could go there no longer. He was alone. A wall, a flight of stairs, an open road.58

Jake was left to wander endlessly as before. When he stopped by the New York Cafe to say goodbye, he was tired. He laid down his head and slept. "A terrible dream was in his mind,"59 a dream that he had many times before:

And in the dream there was a peculiar horror in wandering on and on through the crowd and not knowing where to lay down the burden he had carried in his arms so long.60

And then, wrapped in isolation, Jake left the town to wander about alone, carrying with him an intolerable burden, the burden of spiritual isolation.

Like Dr. Copeland and Jake, Mick Kelly was also unable to accept Singer's death: "There were those two things she could never believe. That Mister Singer had killed himself and was dead. And that she was grown and had to work at Woolworth's."61 Mick quit school and started to work at the first of the summer. All her dreams of music and escape were shattered, and the only hope left her was that somehow she might get a piano:

When she used to come home from school she felt good and was ready to start working on the music.

58Ibid., p. 339.  
59Ibid., p. 345.  
60Ibid., p. 346.  
61Ibid., p. 348.
But now she was always tired. At home she just ate supper and slept and then ate breakfast and went off to the store again.  

Life became a boring repetition and a sort of tiresome burden. She could not understand what had happened:

It was like she was mad all the time. Not how a kid gets mad quick so that soon it is all over—but in another way. Only there was nothing to be mad at. Unless the store. But the store hadn't asked her to take the job. So there was nothing to be mad at. It was like she was cheated. Only nobody had cheated her. So there was nobody to take it out on. However, just the same she had that feeling. Cheated.

But maybe it would be true about the piano and turn out O. K. Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been—the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good.

All right!
O. K.!
Some good.  

Mick's demand that life was "some good" was made in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. She was cheated, but there was nothing on which to place the blame. Because of an inability to express love, Mick seemed destined to spend her life in isolation. Her belief that "it" will be "all right" was merely further deception. For Mick, a lonely life was not easy to accept.

Biff Brannon was more alone than the others, for he had no dreams left to follow. Singer was dead, Blount and his

62 Ibid., p. 350.
63 Ibid., p. 351.
dream were gone, and Mick had matured and hardened. Biff no longer loved her as he once did. As he thought about it, he felt frightened. "Loneliness gripped him so that his breath quickened." 64 It was late in the night, and there was no one to talk to:

The riddle. The question that had taken root in him and would not let him rest. The puzzle of Singer and the rest of them. More than a year had gone by since it had started. More than a year since Blount had hung around the place on his first long drunk and seen the mute for the first time. Since Mick had begun to follow him in and out. And now for a month Singer had been dead and buried. And the riddle was still in him, so that he could not be tranquil. There was something not natural about it all—something like an ugly joke. When he thought of it he felt uneasy and in some unknown way afraid. 65

Then his thoughts congealed into an instantaneous flash of insight:

For in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who—one word—love. His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. Sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted. One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith. Sharply he turned away. 66

64 Ibid., p. 354.
65 Ibid., p. 355.
66 Ibid., pp. 355-356.
Biff turned from the truth. He became isolated within himself, for he had no one, and he loved no one. Life was meaningless, an "ugly joke."

The novel sees that human isolation arises from man's inherent inability to communicate. Singer was a deaf-mute, and the others were sealed in their own worlds by intense self-interest. Spiritual isolation is suggested by the nature and direction of each character's personal devotion and by the failure of love. The silence of God, like the silence of Singer, creates a spiritual insecurity that leaves man isolated. In the entire novel no meaningful reference is made to religion. The gods failed.

In this novel, Carson McCullers has captured man's dread and fear of existence. Both Singer and Biff saw the horror of life in isolation, and Singer sought the easy solution through suicide. Blount, Mick and Copeland deceived themselves by constructing dreams they knew would never see realization. But Biff saw life in all its awfulness, shelved it in the back of his mind trying not to think about it, and continued with daily life, merely enduring.

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CHAPTER IV

THE ISOLATED INDIVIDUAL IN REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE

Carson McCullers' second novel, Reflections in a Golden Eye, was published in 1941. The reviewers were eager to see what this young and strangely intense Southern girl had to add to an already growing reputation for the eccentric and the peculiar. The novel was criticized because of what seemed to the critics to be an unwholesome interest in grotesque characters and situations. The novel was labeled "Southern Gothic," a term that has stuck. Robert Littell of the Yale Review stated that "the inversions and mutilations and nastiness stick in one's mind like burrs." 1 Clifton Fadiman of the New Yorker was disappointed with the work which he described as a collection of "grotesque and forced hallucinations." He felt that the novel was weakened by a "too obvious desire to create people and situations that are strange and startling." 2

An anonymous reviewer in Time magazine felt differently, and praised the novel to an extreme when he wrote:

1Robert Littell, Yale Review, 71, XXX (Spring, 1941), xiii.

2Clifton Fadiman, "Books," New Yorker, XVII (February 14, 1941), 78.
Carson McCullers tells her tale with simplicity, insight, and a rare gift of phrase. She makes its tortures seem at least as valid as the dull suburban tragedies from Farrell's or Dreiser's Midwest, commonly called lifelike. Reflections in a Golden Eye is the Southern school at its most Gothic, but also at its best. It is as though William Faulkner saw to the bottom of matters which merely excite him, shed his stylistic faults, and wrote it all out with Tolstoyan lucidity.¹

The critics were divergent in their reactions, though on the whole, the novel was not well received.

In his preface to Reflections in a Golden Eye, Tennessee Williams wrote that the novel exhibits "an absolute mastery of design." In contrast to the first novel, Williams stated that:

Here the artistic climate is more austere. The tragedy is more distilled: a Grecian purity cools it, the eventually overwhelming impact is of a more reflective order. The key to this deliberate difference is implicit in the very title of the book. Discerning critics should have found it the opposite of a disappointment since it exhibited the one attribute which had yet to be shown in Carson McCullers' stunning array of gifts: the gift of mastery over a youthful lyricism.⁴

Carson McCullers was referred to by Williams as a member of the Gothic school, which he compared to the Existentialist movement in France:

There is actually a common link between the two schools, French and American, but characteristically the motor impulse of the French school

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¹Time, XXXVII (author not given) (February 17, 1941), 96.

is intellectual and philosophic while that of the American is more of an emotional and romantic nature. What is this common link? In my opinion it is most simply definable as a sense, an intuition, of an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience....Reflections in a Golden Eye is one of the purest and most powerful of those works which are conceived in that sense of The Awful which is the desperate black root of nearly all significant modern art, from the Guernica of Picasso to the cartoons of Charles Addams.5

As in the first novel, individual isolation remained a continuing theme in Reflections in a Golden Eye. The opening paragraph set the scene and mood of the novel:

An Army post in peacetime is a dull place. Things happen, but then they happen over and over again. The general plan of a fort itself adds to the monotony—the huge concrete barracks, the neat rows of officers' homes built one precisely like the other, the gym, the chapel, the golf course and the swimming pools—all is designed according to a certain rigid pattern. But perhaps the dullness of a post is caused most of all by insularity and by a surfeit of leisure and safety, for once a man enters the army he is expected only to follow the heels ahead of him.6

Life at the army post, like life in the Southern town in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, was characterized by a dullness and an insularity that was reflected in the hearts of its inhabitants. Within this peaceful compound, a tale of savage terror and intense human alienation was revealed.

5Ibid., pp. x-xi, xiv-xv.

The novel began and the characters were introduced:

There is a fort in the South where a few years ago a murder was committed. The participants of this tragedy were: two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse.\(^7\)

The soldier was Private Ellgee Williams, one of the strangest and most isolated of all the characters in the novel.

Often in the late afternoon he could be seen sitting alone on one of the benches that lined the sidewalk before the barracks.

He was a silent young soldier and in the barracks he had neither an enemy nor a friend. His round sunburned face was marked by a certain watchful innocence.

In his eyes, which were of a curious blend of amber and brown, there was a mute expression that is found usually in the eyes of animals.... He moved with the silence and agility of a wild creature or a thief.\(^8\)

"Silent" and "alone" are the words used by Carson McCullers to describe Private Williams' isolated nature. About him existed an alien look of dumb innocence like that of an animal or a wild creature. His muteness differed from John Singer's in that Singer could not talk, while Williams had no desire to talk. Because none of the other soldiers talked to him, he had no friends:

Private Williams did not smoke, drink, fornicate, or gamble. In the barracks he kept to himself and was something of a mystery to the other men.... Except for riding, Private Williams cared for none of the sports available to enlisted men. No one had ever seen him in

\(^7\)Ibid., pp. 1-2.

\(^8\)Ibid.
the gym or at the swimming pool. Nor had he ever been known to laugh, to become angry, or to suffer in any way. Private Williams always had been so unsociable that hardly half of his sleeping mates even knew his name.9

Ignorant and oblivious, Private Williams lived without thought of or concern for others. Because he was not even aware of his own isolation, he seemed the most unreal, inhuman of all the characters. He was isolated but never lonely, for he was unaware that the quality of loneliness existed. To him, the life of isolation seemed to be the only mode of existence. Often in the evenings he sat alone on the same bench. He rode horseback alone in the forest and sought out a secluded spot far from any paths and difficult to reach.

In this lonely place the soldier always unsaddled his horse and let him go free. Then he took off his clothes and lay down on a large flat rock in the middle of the field. For there was one thing that this soldier could not do without—the sun. Even on the coldest days he would lie still and naked and let the sunlight soak into his flesh. Sometimes, still naked, he stood on the rock and slipped upon the horse's bare back. His horse was an ordinary army plug which, with anyone but Private Williams, could sustain only two gaits—a clumsy trot and a rocking-horse gallop. But with the soldier a marvelous change came over the animal; he cantered or single-footed with proud, stiff elegance. The soldier's body was of a pale golden brown and he held himself erect. Without his clothes he was so slim that the pure, curved outlines of his ribs could be seen. As he cantered about in the sunlight, there was a sensual, savage smile on his lips that would

9Ibid., pp. 3 and 129.
have surprised his barrack mates. After such outings he came back weary to the stables and spoke to no one.\textsuperscript{10}

Between the two animals, the soldier and the horse, a certain rapport was established. Because he either could not or would not talk to men, Private Williams was forced to seek communication elsewhere. Where words failed him, actions did not.

The soldier's naive and innocent appearance and his strange, animal actions were accompanied by a simple and unsophisticated mind. "The young soldier spoke the truth. Although his face wore an expression of still concentration, there were in his mind no plans or thoughts of which he was aware."\textsuperscript{11} Once in a sort of trance-like attitude, he successfully committed a crime. Five years before the novel began, he killed a Negro man during an argument over a wheelbarrow of manure. The murder occurred "very suddenly and without any conscious planning on his part."\textsuperscript{12}

\ldots not once since that time had the thought shaped definitely in his mind that he was a murderer. The mind is like a richly woven tapestry in which the colors are distilled from the experiences of the senses, and the design drawn from the convolutions of the intellect. The mind of Private Williams was imbued with various colors of strange tones, but it was without delineation, void of form.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., pp. 76-77.
\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 35.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 37.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 131.
Like Stavrogin in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Private Williams was so alienated from mankind that he did not know the difference between right and wrong. The mind of the young soldier operated on a sub-human level, below a point at which he could feel guilt for his crime. He did not think as other men, but he felt as they did. Unable to mentally enter the world of other men, he was forced to communicate with an animal. Through his relationship with the horse, Private Williams was able to end his alienation, an alienation forced upon him by his own limitations.

Unable to speak to other men, Private Williams was also unable to communicate with women:

> . . . never before in his life had this young soldier seen a naked woman. He had been brought up in a household exclusively male. From his father, who ran a one-mule farm and preached on Sunday at a Holiness church, he had learned that women carried in them a deadly and catching disease which made men blind, crippled, and doomed to hell. In the army he also heard much talk of this bad sickness and was even himself examined once a month by the doctor to see if he had touched a woman. Private Williams had never willingly touched, or looked at, or spoken to a female since he was eight years old.\(^{14}\)

Then he saw Captain Pendleton's wife, Leonora, standing naked in her living room. Though he feared her woman nakedness, he was strongly attracted to her. As in the instance of the murder, the soldier had no thoughts, only desires:

> The expression of his mute face had not been changed by his experience, but now and then

\(^{14}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 25.}\)
he narrowed his gold-brown eyes as though he were forming within himself some subtle scheme. When the Captain's wife had left the dining-room, he still stood there for a time. Then very slowly he turned away. The light behind him laid a great dim shadow of himself on the smooth grass of the lawn. The soldier walked like a man weighted by a dark dream and his footsteps were soundless.\textsuperscript{15}

The sight of Leonora Penderton's naked body initiated a chain of events in which Private Williams subconsciously tried to make an identification with the outside world. Though he still sat alone on the bench in front of the barracks, he began to frequent the movie and the gymnasium. At the roller-skating rink he had his first taste of alcohol, a glass of beer:

Three men, all old-timers, were surprised when Private Williams left his table to sit with them for a while. The young soldier looked into their faces and seemed to be on the point of asking some question of them. But in the end he did not speak, and after a time he went away.\textsuperscript{16}

When vocal communication failed, the soldier tried to relate in the only way he knew how, physically. He picked a fight in the latrine:

While fighting, his face expressed neither effort nor anger; his features still were impassive and only the sweat on his forehead, the look of blindness in his eyes, showed the results of his struggle. Private Williams had his opponent in a helpless condition and the fight was already won when all at once he himself suddenly gave up. He seemed completely to lose interest in the fight and

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 26.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., pp. 128-129.
did not even bother to defend himself. He was soundly beaten and his head was banged viciously against the cement floor.\textsuperscript{17}

Isolated from the novel, this incident seems to indicate that Private Williams desired pain, that he was a masochist. Yet there is no other incident to uphold this point. The young soldier simply lost interest, for he was incapable even of anger. His defeat was twofold. Not only did he lose the fight, but he also resigned himself to incommunication. It was as though he suddenly realized the futility of his efforts. His only remaining choice at communication was with the naked woman.

Since he had first seen Leonora Penderton naked in her living room, Private Williams had been visiting her at night. He crept in like a young animal, crouched by her bed, and watched as she slept. Once he was courageous enough to reach over and touch her hair, but she never awakened. For Private Williams, every attempt at communication ended in futility.

In all of McCullers' gallery of isolated individuals, the young soldier seems to be one of the most alienated. Out of his isolated and restricted background, Private Williams unconsciously sought an unfulfilled release from his isolation. His only significant relationship was with a horse. He was afraid of women and was unable to communicate with his fellow soldiers. All other social contacts were closed to him:

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 175.
To this young Southern soldier the officers were in the same vague category as Negroes—they had a place in his life, but he did not look on them as being human.18

Ironically, the only person who wished to communicate with Private Williams was an officer.

The characterization of this officer, Captain William Penderton, is the study of a man isolated by his own perverse cruelty and hate. He was described as being something of a savant, yet "in spite of his knowledge of many separate facts, the Captain never in his life had had an idea in his head."19

His personality differed in some respects from the ordinary. He stood in a somewhat curious relation to the three fundamentals of existence—life itself, sex, and death. Sexually the Captain obtained within himself a delicate balance between the male and female elements, with the susceptibilities of both the sexes and the active powers of neither...In his balance between the two great instincts, toward life and toward death, the scale was heavily weighted to one side—to death. Because of this the Captain was a coward.20

The Captain was also a homosexual as "he had a sad penchant for becoming enamoured of his wife's lovers."21 "The fact that Captain Penderton in Reflections in a Golden Eye, is homosexual, is ... a symbol of handicap and impotence."22

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18Ibid., p. 177.  
21Ibid., p. 13.  
wrote Carson McCullers. Like John Singer's isolation, Captain Penderton's was also a result of his physical defects and his method of seeking love.

Both love and hate are emotions essential to human beings, and of the two the Captain could only hate:

There are times when a man's greatest need is to have someone to love, some focal point for his diffused emotions. Also there are times when the irritations, disappointments, and fears of life, restless as spermatozoids, must be released in hate. The unhappy Captain had no one to hate and for the past months he had been miserable.\(^{23}\)

Toward his wife, the Captain felt neither love nor hate. Though "he was just as jealous of his wife as he was of her lover,"\(^{24}\) he hated neither one of them. He felt a sexual attraction to Major Langdon, his wife's lover, though he dared not express it. He disliked the Major's wife, Alison, "because of her total indifference to himself."\(^{25}\) But he did not hate her either.

Captain Penderton noticed the young soldier from the first. Williams had spilled coffee on the Captain's silk suit while serving at a party given by one of the lieutenants. The private also worked in the stables and took care of Mrs. Penderton's horse. In the Captain's mind, the soldier and the horse were equated. To the Captain, it was an unpleasant

\(^{23}\) McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye, p. 67-68.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 41.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 42.
association, because he feared both the soldier and the horse. "The Captain always had been afraid of horses: he only rode because it was the thing to do, and because this was another one of his ways of tormenting himself."26

In the eye of the horse, the Captain saw a reflection of himself, and of his life as it existed on the surface. But he could see no deeper. "... the Captain looked into the horse's round, purple eyes and saw there a liquid image of his own frightened face."27 This superficial reflection is a symbol of the Captain's inability to see below the surface and perceive his problem.

He mounted the horse and rode:

The Captain gave Firebird his head just long enough for the joy of freedom to be aroused and then checked him without warning. This sort of behavior was not new to the Captain. Often in his life he had exacted many strange and secret little penances on himself which he would have found difficult to explain to others.28

Suddenly the horse broke loose, and the Captain feared he would be killed. As the horse ran faster, the Captain began to enjoy the danger and the sensation of being near death:

The Captain knew no terror now; he had soared to that rare level of consciousness where the mystic feels that the earth is he and that he is the earth. Clinging crabwise to the runaway horse, there was a grin of rapture on his bloody mouth.

In an agony of dread the Captain thought: "When this ends, all will be over for me."29
The horse finally stopped, and the Captain could make him go no further:

He broke off a long switch, and with the last of his spent strength he began to beat the horse savagely....Then at last the horse stood motionless and gave a broken sigh....Out in the forest there, the Captain looked like a broken doll that has been thrown away. He was sobbing aloud.30

The Captain collapsed and lost consciousness. When he awoke he saw the young soldier lying naked on the large, flat rock:

He dwelt on the pure-cut lines of the young man's body. He called out something inarticulate and received no reply. A rage came in him. He felt a rush of hatred for the soldier that was as exorbitant as the joy he had experienced on runaway Firebird. All the humiliations, the envies, and the fears of his life found vent in this great anger.

His mind swarmed with a dozen cunning schemes by which he could make the soldier suffer. In his heart the Captain knew that this hatred, passionate as love, would be with him all the remaining days of his life.31

At last he found someone to hate, the soldier. The Captain broke the spirit of the horse as he was later to destroy the young soldier. Both acts are masochistic, the products of hate and perverse pleasure.

The Captain's ability to express emotion was singular.

He was reared in the home of two old-maid aunts where he learned only to hate:

31 Ibid., pp. 103-104.
His aunts were not bitter except when alone— they laughed a great deal and were constantly arranging picnics, fussy excursions, and Sunday dinners to which they invited other old maids. Nevertheless, they had used the little boy as a sort of fulcrum to lift the weight of their own heavy crosses. The Captain had never known real love. His aunts gushed over him with sentimental effusiveness and knowing no better he repaid them with the same counterfeit coin.32

In addition to his distorted concept of love, Captain Penderton was burdened by warped memories of the past. His family had been plantation owners in Georgia before the Civil War, but the present generation amounted to very little. "Behind him was a history of barbarous splendor, ruined poverty, and family hauteur... . Being a great snob, and with no real pride in him, the Captain set exaggerated store by the lost past."33

His inability to understand love coupled with his obsession with the past culminated in Captain Penderton's alienation from society. "He felt himself isolated from all other persons."34 He could communicate only by hate, and so he hated Private Williams; "... the Captain felt an aching want for contact between them of some sort. The thought of the soldier tantalized him continually."35 Because of the difference in rank, the two could never form a meaningful relationship: "Except through his riding (and no feet of horsemanship

32Ibid., p. 101.  
33Ibid., p. 102.  
34Ibid., p. 170.  
35Ibid., pp. 133-134.
was reckless enough for the Captain these days) there was no way at all for him to establish relations with the soldier whom he had come to hate.\textsuperscript{36}

The Captain's desire to relate to Private Williams increased, and he dreamed of their eventual contact:

In these phantasies he saw himself as a youth, a twin almost of the soldier whom he hated—with a young, easy body that even the cheap uniform of a common soldier could not make ungraceful, with thick glossy hair and round eyes unshadowed by study and strain.

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., p. 133.

The Captain was overcome by a feeling that both repelled and fascinated him—it was as though he and the young soldier were wrestling together naked, body to body, in a fight to death.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., pp. 157, 169.

As Captain Penderton gained an awareness of his own isolation, a change came over him. The hate which he had once felt left him:

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., pp. 171, 137.

As he thought of the two thousand men living together in this great quadrangle, he felt suddenly alone. He sat in the dark car and as he stared at the lighted, crowded rooms inside, as he heard the sounds of shouts and ringing voices, the tears came to his glassy eyes. A bitter loneliness gnawed in him.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., pp. 171, 137.

Captain Penderton's desire to be with Private Williams was so intense that he began to follow the soldier. One
afternoon he saw Private Williams sitting alone on the bench in front of the barracks. "After he had passed the soldier he had to suppress a craving to turn around, and as he walked away he felt his heart swell with a wild, nostalgic sadness which he could not control."\(^{39}\) He spoke to the soldier, called out his name but could say nothing else. "Again the Captain stood mute and suffocated before the young man. In his heart there coursed a wild tirade of curses, words of love, supplications, and abuse. But in the end he turned away, still silent."\(^{40}\)

Captain Penderton remained isolated, for the relationship with Private Williams could never be consummated. Yet the most pathetic failure of relationship occurred between the Captain and his wife, for whom marriage was an empty and hollow ritual. Though they shared the same name and the same house, they remained unable to communicate.

In contrast to the other characters, Leonora Penderton and Major Morris Langdon led simple, uncomplicated lives. Leonora was a handsome and healthy woman and "enjoyed a reputation as a good hostess, an excellent sportswoman and even as a great lady."\(^{41}\) Some sensed a strange element in her personality. "The truth of the matter was that she was a

\(^{39}\) Ibid., p. 159.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., p. 173.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 22.
little feebleminded. "42 'She could not have multiplied twelve by thirteen under threat of the rack."43 "When she married the Captain she had been a virgin. Four nights after her wedding she was still a virgin, and on the fifth night her status was changed only enough to leave her somewhat puzzled. 44

After her marriage, she had a few lovers, but there is no reason to suppose that she loved any of them. Leonora knew only contentment, not love. She sought her lovers out of loneliness and need. Because her husband could not supply her either companionship or love, she turned to others.

Like Leonora, Major Morris Langdon was healthy and handsome; in fact, his nickname at the army post was "The Buffalo."

This was because when in the saddle he slumped his great heavy shoulders and lowered his head. The Major was a fine horseman and, when a young Lieutenant, he had made a rare name for himself on the polo field. 45

One of Major Langdon's favorite aphorisms was:

'Only two things matter to me now—to be a good animal and to serve my country. A healthy body and patriotism.' 46

He was rough, and insensitive to the needs of his wife. He did not require love, only companionship, which he found with Leonora Penderton rather than his wife.

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42 Ibid., p. 22.
43 Ibid., p. 22.
44 Ibid., p. 23.
46 Ibid., p. 168.
Alison Langdon, the Major's wife,...

was a small, dark, fragile woman with a
large nose and sensitive mouth. She was very
ill and she looked ill. Not only was this ill-
ness physical, but she had been tortured to
the bone by grief and anxiety so that now she
was on the verge of actual lunacy.47

After the death of her eleven month old, deformed child,
Alison sank into an ever-deepening depression. One evening
she left Captain Penderton's house, where she and her husband
were visiting, and ran home. "They found Mrs. Langdon un-
conscious and she had cut off the tender nipples of her breasts
with the garden shears."48 Alison's self-mutilation is a sym-
bol of her alienation from the normal world and of her desire
to join the grotesque world of her dead, deformed child. Her
alienation was intensified by her near insanity and by her in-
ability to relate to the insensitive people around her. She
despised Captain Penderton, and she had ignored her husband
since she discovered his affair with Leonora. Only with
Anacleto, her Filipino servant, was she able to relate.

Anacleto, the seventeen year old servant, was a small,
sensitive boy who shared with Alison a common appreciation for
painting, music, and sewing. He worshiped his mistress:

It was common knowledge that he thought the
Lord had blundered grossly in the making of
everyone except himself and Madame Alison—
the sole exceptions to this were people behind

48 Ibid., p. 40.
footlights, midgets, great artists, and egg-like fabulous folk. 49

Both Alison and Anacleto were isolated because of their sensitivity and their perceptiveness. And like the midgets, they were physically set apart from others. The perceptive, the grotesque, and the strange are alienated.

One afternoon Anacleto described to his ailing mistress the image he saw in the fire:

... he sat in a meditative gesture with his chin in his hands, staring at the embers of the fire. 'A peacock of a sort of ghastly green. With one immense golden eye. And in it these reflections of something tiny and—'

'Grotesque,' she finished for him. 50

The golden eye of the peacock reflects a world in which men move toward an invariable fate caused by their own unavoidable actions. 51 Isolation is a snare from which none of them can escape.

Alison's complete insanity and inevitable death were accelerated when she saw Private Williams outside the Penderton house. Thinking it was her husband, she ran to tell Captain Penderton what she saw. The strain was too much for her, and she died.

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49 Ibid., p. 35.

50 Ibid., p. 124.

The next night, Captain Penderton saw the soldier outside his window. He heard the back door close and the footsteps on the stair. He took the pistol and crossed the hall into his wife's bedroom:

As he did this, certain dormant fragments of memory—a shadow at the window, a sound in the night—came to him. He said to himself that he knew all. But what it was he knew he could not have expressed. He was only certain that this was the end.52

He shot the crouched soldier. "The Captain had slumped against the wall. In his queer, coarse wrapper he resembled a broken and dissipated monk."53

The murder was a final isolation, an act of perverse cruelty and hate in which Captain Penderton extracted a masochistic delight in torturing himself. For him, life was finished. Private Williams was isolated in death. The other characters were left stranded without the ability to love. The novel is a parable of human isolation, and its characters are the symbols of that isolation.

52McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye, p. 133.
53Ibid., p. 133.
CHAPTER V

THE ISOLATED INDIVIDUAL IN

THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING

The Member of the Wedding, Carson McCullers' third novel, was published in 1946 and was met with the same divergent criticism as the previous novels. An extreme case in point is Edmund Wilson's comment that "The whole story seems utterly pointless." He must have been uneasy about his criticism, because he added, "I hope that I am not being stupid about this book." Wilson also commented that "The Member of the Wedding has no element of drama at all."¹ It won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Donaldson Award when it was converted into a Broadway play by McCullers.

The anonymous reviewer of Time magazine, who gave Reflections in a Golden Eye such an overwhelming review, treated the latest novel with flippancy. Displaying a peculiar aptitude for uneven criticism, Time saw the novel primarily as an "attempt to recapture the elusive moment when childhood melts into adolescence."² The reviewer did not seem to notice the overall theme of isolation or the intense alienation of the characters.

¹New Yorker, XXII (March 30, 1946), 87.
²Time, XLVII (April 1, 1946), 98.
In contrast to Time, Phillip Lightfoot Scruggs wrote in the Virginia Quarterly:

I do not know of any other contemporary American author who has so finely probed the minds of three persons who are, by the usual standards, immature, and so by any standards difficult to write about.  

Diana Trilling praised McCullers' ability to create an intensely isolated character:

McCullers . . . can communicate almost more of the child's emotions of boredom and emptiness, of the stoppage of time, of the draining of all meaning from life at the same time that the air is so heavy with unformed meanings, than the reader can receive with equanimity.

Though the novel was both attacked and praised, few critics saw beneath the surface to the deeper level of meaning. In a perceptive article, George Dangerfield pointed out that:

. . . the further you read into The Member of the Wedding, the more you realize, it seems to me, that Frankie is merely the projection of a problem that has nothing much to do with adolescence. . . generally they are beings of no special age, discoursing in what appears to be a dream or trance. Their problem is elementary, unanswerable, and common to all age levels. . . the problem which obsesses them is human loneliness.

Tennessee Williams wrote that the "second novel is still not her greatest; it is surpassed by The Member of the Wedding, her third novel which combined the heart-breaking

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3Virginia Quarterly, XXII (Summer, 1946), 451.
4Nation, CLXII (April 6, 1946), 406.
tenderness of the first with the sculptural quality of the second."

The central character of the novel, Frankie Addams, was a confused adolescent trapped in a world of "nightmarish intensity." It was a time when the agonies of growth and the search for identity were coupled with the paradoxical desires to escape, to experience, and to belong. These feelings suddenly converged on Frankie on the occasion of her brother's wedding, the symbol of all her longings. The novel began:

It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid.

The opening passage set the tone and theme of the novel, that of spiritual and physical isolation.

Frankie hung around doorways and was "always on the threshold of things," but never really inside. She suffered

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7Cayton Kohler, "Carson McCullers: Variations on a Theme," College English, Xill (October, 1951), 2.


9Carson McCullers, The Member of the Wedding (Boston, 1946), p. 3.

10Oliver Evans, "The Theme of Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCullers," New World Writing (New York, April 1952), 302.
an intense loneliness because she was not a member of any group. Her mother was dead, and her father was too busy.

Frankie's frustration, coupled with her boredom, made the "dog days of August" seem "like a silent crazy jungle under glass." 11

In addition to not belonging, Frankie feared she would grow up to be a freak. At twelve years of age she was already five feet five and three-quarters inches tall and wore size seven shoes. By her own calculations she would be over nine feet tall on her eighteenth birthday. "And what would be a lady who is over nine feet tall? She would be a freak." 12

Every October Frankie visited the fair, and it was always the freaks who made the greatest impression on her:

She was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you. She was afraid of their long Freak eyes. And all the years she had remembered them, until this day. 13

The fear of being different pushed her further from her desired goal of joining the mass of normal humanity. She wished she were a boy and could enlist in the army.

But she could not join the war, and this made her sometimes feel restless and blue. She decided to donate blood to the Red Cross; she wanted to donate a quart a week and her blood

11 McCullers, The Member of the Wedding, p. 3.
12 Ibid., p. 22.
13 Ibid., p. 23.
would be in the veins of Australians and Fighting French and Chinese, all over the whole world, and it would be as though she were close kin to all of these people. 14

More and more as the summer passed she realized that she was not a member and did not belong. She tried to escape:

The long and flowering spring was over and the summer in the town was ugly and lonesome and very hot. Every day she wanted more and more to leave the town: to light out for South America or Hollywood or New York City. But although she packed her suitcase many times, she could never decide to which of these places she ought to go, or how she would get there by herself.

So she stayed home and hung around the kitchen. 15

In her bedroom she thought alone and made secret plans of escape:

Before Frankie there were now two objects—a lavender seashell and a glass globe with snow inside that could be shaken into a snowstorm. When she held the seashell to her ear, she could hear the warm wash of the Gulf of Mexico, and think of a green palm island far away. And she could hold the snow globe to her narrowed eyes and watch the whirling white flakes fall until they blinded her. She dreamed of Alaska. 16

Like Frankie, Carson McCullers in her own adolescence also wished to escape the heavy, humdrum life of south Georgia and seek a refuge both different and exciting. McCullers wrote:

14Ibid., p. 21.

15Ibid., p. 30.

16Ibid., p. 13.
the whole town, seemed to pinch and cramp
my adolescent heart. I longed for wanderings.
I longed especially for New York....I dreamed
of the distant city of skyscrapers and snow . . . 17

Frankie began to think of the wedding between her brother,
Jarvis, and his fiancée, and she felt cheated. That Friday morn-
ing the wedding had been announced:

For only yesterday Frankie had never thought
seriously about a wedding. She knew that her only
brother, Jarvis, was to be married. He had become
engaged to a girl in Winter Hill just before he
went to Alaska. Jarvis was a corporal in the army
and he had spent almost two years in Alaska.
Frankie had not seen her brother for a long, long
time, and his face had become masked and changing,
like a face seen under water.19

Frankie did not know her brother, for she was alienated
from him by age and place. He was a symbol of the excitement
and adventure that she could not have. The announcement of
the wedding made the world seem unstable. "The world is cer-
tainly a sudden place,"19 said Frankie as she thought about
the wedding. "The name for what had happened to her, Frankie
did not know, but she could feel her squeezed heart beating
against the table edge."20

Frankie emotionally, rather than intellectually, per-
ceived that she was alone and not loved. Her feeling of

17Carson McCullers, "Now I Began to Write," Mademoiselle,
XXVII (September, 1948), p. 257.
16McCullers, The Member of the Wedding, p. 7.
19Ibid.
20Ibid., pp. 6-7.
loneliness made the town appear alien and the kitchen resemble the room in a 'crazy-house.' To her the wedding became not only a symbol of escape but also a means of solving her loneliness.

The wedding also became an object of her love, for she saw in it a chance to belong. By becoming a "member" of the wedding she would become a "we" rather than merely a "me."

They are the we of me. Yesterday, and all the twelve years of her life, she had only been Frankie. She was an I person who had to walk around and do things by herself. All other people had a we to claim, all other except her. When Berenice said we, she meant Honey and Big Mama, her lodge, or her church. The we of her father was the store. All members of clubs have a we to belong to and talk about. The soldiers in the army can say we, and even the criminals on chain-gangs. But the old Frankie had had no we to claim, unless it would be the terrible summer we of her and John Henry and Berenice—and that was the last we in the world she wanted. Now all this was suddenly over with and changed. There was her brother and the bride.21

Her intentions were set, and her path of escape was certain. She told Berenice:

I'm going to run away from home....I'm going to Winter Hill. I'm going to the wedding. And I swear to Jesus by my two eyes that I'm never coming back here anymore.22

Frankie changed her name to P. Jasmine to fit her newfound destiny. She felt connected to all men, and the town suddenly opened up to her. "She walked the streets entitled

21Ibid., p. 50.
22Ibid., p. 54.
as a queen and mingled everywhere. It was the day when, from the beginning, the world seemed no longer separate from herself and when all at once she felt included."

The day before the wedding, F. Jasmine went downtown to share her new destiny with all who would listen. She told all those she met about the wedding and how she was to be a part of it. She stopped at her father's jewelry store and told him that she would not be coming back, but he did not listen. He was too busy. Between them there existed a barrier through which there was no communication, so she was forced to tell strangers.

First she told the bartender at the Blue Moon, a place normally off-limits to children. But that day F. Jasmine felt older, and no one seemed to mind. The bartender only nodded and did not disagree. Next she told a woman who was sweeping the sidewalk. At the close of F. Jasmine's story the woman said, "Well, I declare," and turned away. Next F. Jasmine saw a construction crew:

It was the tractor-man F. Jasmine chose to hear her plans—running beside him, her head thrown back to watch his sunburned face, she had to cup her hands around her mouth to make her voice heard. Even so it was uncertain if he understood, for when she stopped, he laughed and yelled back to her something she could not quite catch.

23 Ibid., p. 59.
24 Ibid., p. 75.
25 Ibid.
Later she met a real 'leader' soldier to whom she tried to tell her story. But the soldier did not seem to listen. He asked her for a date, and she agreed to meet him that night at nine. Later, she could not understand why she had said yes.

Each incident ended in non-communication. In her excitement to share her new relationship with the world, F. Jasmine was unable to relate to any of the people. During her travel she saw someone else to tell:

An old colored man, stiff and proud on his rattling wagon seat, drove a sad blindered mule down toward the Saturday market. F. Jasmine looked at him, he looked at her, and to the outward appearance that was all. But in that glance, F. Jasmine felt between his eyes and her own eyes a new unnameable connection, as though they were known to each other.

In the eyes of the old Negro man, F. Jasmine recognized her own alienation. Like the freaks at the circus, the old Negro was isolated from the mass of humanity by a physical difference.

In this section, there is a miniature parable. The restless organ grinder and his monkey, forever wandering like minstrels throughout the book, are representative of humanity. They would look at each other with the same scared exasperation, their wrinkled faces very sad.

26 Ibid., p. 67.
27 Ibid., p. 66.
29 McCullers, The Member of the Wedding, p. 20.
After the outing in town, F. Jasmine went back to the house and to the kitchen that had become not only a refuge but also a prison. The "ugly old kitchen" bored her, but she was powerless to leave it. There she spent the hot summer afternoons with her only two companions, Berenice the maid, and John Henry, her six-year-old cousin.

Berenice Sadie Brown was not only the Addams' maid but also the companion of the two children:

Berenice had been the cook since Frankie could remember. She was very black and broad-shouldered and short. She always said that she was thirty-five years old, but she had been saying that at least three years. Her hair was parted, plaited, and greased close to the skull, and she had a flat and quiet face. There was only one thing wrong about Berenice—her left eye was bright blue glass. It stared out fixed and wild from her quiet, colored face, and why she had wanted a blue eye nobody human would ever know. Her right eye was dark and sad. Berenice dealt slowly, licking her thumb when the sweaty cards stuck together. 30

Berenice had had only one great love in her life, Lucie Freeman, who died and left her a widow. The rest of her life was spent in search for another Lucie. She had tried two successive marriages, but both failed. Berenice's emotional position colored her intellectual perception, for she never realized that she could not have Lucie again.

John Henry West was F. Jasmine's first cousin and her only other friend:

... his chest was white and wet and naked, and he wore around his neck a tiny lead donkey tied by

30Ibid., p. 5.
a string . . . all summer he would eat dinner and
spend the day with her, or eat supper and spend
the night; and she could not make him go home.
She was small to be six years old . . . John Henry
had a little screwed white face and he wore tiny
gold-rimmed glasses.31

When P. Jasmine talked about the freaks, John Henry
listened intently. He had gone with her to see the freak
show at the fair and slipped away:

She pushed through the crowd to the Pin Head booth,
where John Henry had stood all afternoon. The
little Pin Head skipped and giggled and sassed
around, with a shrunken head no larger than an
orange, which was shaved except for one lock tied
with a pink bow at the top.

John Henry held out an imaginary skirt and,
touching his finger to the top of his big head, he
skipped and danced like the Pin Head around the
kitchen table.

Then he said: "She was the cutest little
girl I ever saw. I never saw anything so cute
in my whole life. Did you, Frankie?"

"No," she said. "I didn't think she was
cute."

"We and you both," said Berenice.32

The heart of the novel involved those three characters
as they sat in the Arab kitchen playing cards on a hot Sat-
urday afternoon in August. It was the day before the wedding,
and P. Jasmine was both nervous with expectation and bored
with the repetition of the summer afternoons. Berenice crit-
icized her for telling her stories to strangers:

"Frankie, I honestly believe you have turned
crazy on us. Walking around all over town and

31Ibid., p. 6.
telling total strangers this big tale. You know
in your soul this mania of yours is pure foolish-
ness."33

She explained F. Jasmine's mania in terms of love:

"No," said Berenice. "I never before in all
my days heard of anybody falling in love with a
wedding. I have heard many peculiar things, but
I have never heard of that before."34

Berenice issued a warning:

"But what I'm warning is this," said Berenice.
"If you start out falling in love with some unheard-
of thing like that, what is going to happen to you?
If you take a mania like this, it won't be the last
time and of that you can be sure. So what will be-
come of you? Will you be trying to break into wed-
dings the rest of your days? And what kind of life
would that be?"35

Carson McCullers feels that love is the only solution to
loneliness, but it is not an easy solution. F. Jasmine's love
of the wedding could lead only to disillusionment, for she
chose an impossible love object. Nor would Berenice find
fulfillment. Foolishly, she searched for the love of a dead
man. She might have done well to take her own advice.

Though all three of the characters talked "to" each other,
they remained isolated. Each saw the world from his own per-
spective:

It was the time of afternoon when in the old days;
sitting with the red cards at the table, they would
sometimes begin to criticize the Creator. They
would judge the work of God, and mention the ways

33Ibid., p. 96.
34Ibid., p. 99.
35Ibid., p. 130.
how they would improve the world. And Holy Lord God John Henry's voice would rise up happy and high and strange, and his world was a mixture of delicious and freak, and he did not think in global terms.

But the world of the Holy Lord God Berenice Sadie Brown was a different world, and it was round and just and reasonable. First, there would be no separate colored people in the world, but all human beings would be light brown color with blue eyes and black hair. There would be no colored people and no white people to make the colored people feel cheap and sorry all through their lives. No colored people, but all human men and ladies and children as one loving family on the earth.

But the old Frankie's world was the best of the three worlds. She agreed with Berenice about the main laws of her creation, but she added many things: an aeroplane and a motorcycle to each person, a world club with certificates and badges.... She also changed the seasons, leaving out summer altogether, and adding much snow. She planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls...

The separateness of these views reflects the alienation of the characters. Each fashioned the world from his own limited point of view, so that to the others this certain point of view seemed grotesque.

Frankie perceived this difference. Often in the evenings as she sat in the arbor "the old question came to her—the who she was and what she would be in the world, and why she was standing there that minute." That Saturday afternoon in the kitchen, she asked Berenice:

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36Ibid., pp. 116-117.
37Wayne D. Dodd, "Development of Theme through Symbol," The Georgia Review, XVII (Summer, 1963), 211.
38McCullers, The Member of the Wedding, p. 55.
"Listen," F. Jasmine said. "What I've been trying to say is this. Doesn't it strike you as strange that I am I. and you are you? I am F. Jasmine Adams. And you are Berenice Sadie Brown. And we can look at each other, and touch each other, and stay together year in and year out in the same room. Yet always I am I, and you are you. And I can't ever be anything else but me, and you can't ever be anything else but you. Have you ever thought of that? And does it seem to you strange?"

Frankie hit upon the basis of all isolation, the physical impossibility of one man to enter the thoughts of another.

Berenice partially understood and said that she had occasionally thought about that phenomenon:

"I think I have a vague idea what you were driving at," she said. "We all of us somehow caught. We born that way or that way and we don't know why. But we caught anyhow. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourselves. Is that what you was trying to say?"

Berenice explained that she herself was caught worse than the other two:

"Because I am black," said Berenice. "Because I am colored. Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourselves. So we caught that firstway I was telling you, as all human beings is caught. And we caught as colored people also."

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39Ibid., p. 133.

40Ibid., p. 144.

41Ibid.
Berenice was saying that all men are "caught" in the human dilemma, but for the Negro this quality is magnified. Berenice continued:

"Sometimes a boy like Honey feel like he just can't breathe no more. He feel like he got to break something or break himself. Sometimes it just about more than we can stand."42

Honey Brown was a mulatto whom F. Jasmine thought of as a "half-boy." Big Mama had said that:

. . . he was a boy that God had not finished. The creator had withdrawn his hand from him too soon. God had not finished him so he had to go around doing one thing and then another to finish himself up.43

Honey was torn between two worlds, the black and the white, but he could enter neither. F. Jasmine remembered:

His lips could move as light as butterflies and he could talk as well as any human she had ever heard—but other times he would answer with a colored jumble that even his own family could not follow.44

Man is incomplete, for he is caught in the trap of his own humanity and mortality.

But F. Jasmine saw the other side of the paradox:

"Yet at the same time you might almost use the word loose instead of caught. Although they are two opposite words. I mean you walk around and you see all the people. And to me they look loose....I mean you don't see what joins them up

42 Ibid., p. 144.
43 Ibid., p. 154.
44 Ibid., p. 155.
together. You don't know where they all came from, or where they're all going to.

But what is it all about? People loose and at the same time caught. Caught and loose. All these people and you don't know what joins them up. There's loose to be some sort of reason and connection. But somehow I can't seem to name it. I don't know. "57

F. Jassine used the term "loose" in an attempt to communicate her own feeling of estrangement.

Berenice explained as best she could:

If you did you would be God, said Berenice.

"Didn't you know that?"

"They were born and they want to die."

"We know just as much. Then beyond that we don't know no more." 66

F. Jassine closed the scene in the room by saying, "I never did say just what I was talking about." 67 The afternoon was over, the sun began to set, and the three silent people huddled close together. "The three of them blinked at each other in the light as though they were three strangers or three ghosts." 68 They cried because they were afraid and unable to communicate. Here is a universal picture of man suffering because of his isolation. The poignancy with which the theme is expressed and the realism with which the characters are developed is frightening. Try as he may, man remains alone and incomplete, unable to fathom the mystery of life.

47 Ibid. 48 Ibid., p. 142.
During the long, intense scene in the kitchen, a piano was being tuned at a neighboring house. The background of the entire section was broken by the sound of the piano tuner's work. The sound created even greater anxiety in an already anxious situation. The piano was not yet tuned to suit him, and he began to harp and insist on another note. Again he played the scale up until the seventh note, and again he stuck there and did not finish. 449

“It is that last note,” F. Jasmine said. "If you start with A and go on up to C, there is a curious thing that seems to make the difference between C and A all the difference in the world. Twice as much difference as between any other two notes in the scale. Yet they are side by side there on the piano just as close together as the other notes. Do ray see fa sol la te? Te. Te. Te. It could drive you wild!” 50

The persistent tuning of the piano was never completed, so that F. Jasmine and Serenice were always left hanging short of the finished scale. Like the discussion in the kitchen that was left unfinished because of their inability to communicate, the scale too was never completed. The thematic significance of this motif was established: the world is somehow unfinished, incomplete. 51 The jarring sound of the piano intensified the scene's message of the inability of men to communicate.

49Ibid., p. 131.
50Ibid.
51Ibid., p. 130.
F. Jasmine remained unable to communicate. Saturday night after the meeting in the Adams' kitchen, she went downtown to keep her date with the red-headed soldier. She met him at the blue moon cafe and went up to his hotel room when he invited her. He tried to seduce her, but she hit him on the head with a large glass pitcher which knocked him out. She left in a panic and ran home. The only word she muttered was "crazy." This incident depicts another unsuccessful attempt at communication.

When F. Jasmine reached home, she started to tell John Henry what had happened:

But as she looked into those cold, child eyes she knew that she could not explain. John Henry would not understand, and his green eyes gave her a funny feeling. Sometimes his mind was like the pictures he drew with crayons on tablet paper.

It was impossible to understand his point of view. And he did not understand her either.52

The wedding was the next day, Sunday. During the wedding trip on the bus, she saw the very things she wished most to escape:

They were supposed to be traveling north, but it seemed to her rather that the bus was going south instead. The sky turned burning pale and the day blazed. They passed the fields of windless corn that had a blue look in the glare, red-furrowed cotton land, stretches of black pine woods. And mile by mile the countryside became more southern. The towns they passed—New City, Leeville, Cheehaw—each town seemed

52 McCullers, The Member of the Wedding, p. 166.
smaller than the one before, until at nine o'clock they reached the quietest place of all, where they changed horses, called Flowering Branch.53

During the last section of the novel, F. Jasmine's name was again changed. In the first section she was Frankie, a scared and lonely child. F. Jasmine, of the second section, created an imaginary world in which she was assured of the security of love. In the third section her name became Frances.

The final crushing blow came when she was unable to become a member of the wedding:

F. Jasmine felt an ache in her throat and could not speak. Jarvis, when she went to find him in the yard, lifted her up in a rough-house way and said, "Frankie the lanky the tall Frankie, the toe-legged, toe-legged bow-legged Frankie. And he gave her a dollar.

She stood in the corner of the bride's room, wanting to say: I love the two of you so much and you are the we of me. Please take me with you from the wedding, for we belong to be together.54

They did not take her, and after the trip home she tried to run away. She packed her suitcase and walked downtown, but there seemed to be no escape. It occurred to her that she might commit suicide. She got her father's pistol out of her suitcase, held it to her head, and then changed her mind. She decided to go to the Blue Moon to find the soldier and propose marriage. There was only knowing that she must

53 Ibid., p. 171.
54 Ibid., pp. 174-175.
find somebody, anybody, that she could join with to go away. For now she admitted she was too scared to go into the world alone.\(^5\)

The police caught her before she found the soldier, and her father took her home:

The world was too far away, and there was no way any more that she could be included. She was back to the fear of the summertime, the old feelings that the world was separate from herself— and the failed wedding had quickened the fear to terror. There had been a time, only yesterday, when she felt that every person that she saw was somehow connected with herself and there was between the two of them an instant recognition.\(^6\)

Frances ended up at the place where she began, but the situation rapidly changed. The intense August world vanished when school started in September. Frances found a new friend at school, John Henry died of meningitis, the Addams's moved to the suburbs, and Berenice quit. All the lives ended in the isolation in which they began. John Henry was isolated in death, the most intense and inevitable form of all isolation. Berenice probably married T. T. Williams, though she did not love him. Her endless search for Ludie was never satisfied, and so she was destined to only a partial fulfillment.

Frances' dream of escape was not realised; she could not become a member of the wedding. But she adjusted and replaced

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 185.
\(^6\)Ibid., p. 186.
the old dream with yet another impossible one. Her new dream was to be "a great post—or else the foremost authority on radar." It seems on the surface that the novel ends on a positive note, yet the cautious reader can see through this seeming optimism. On the whole the book must be viewed as a parable on "the essential loneliness of man and the eternal futility of escape." Theoretically, man can be lifted above his own loneliness by love. Yet as the novel demonstrates, love is difficult to attain, if it be attainable at all.

57 Ibib., p. 191.
58 Evans, p. 349.
CHAPTER VI

THE ISOLATED INDIVIDUAL IN

THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFE

The Ballad of the Sad Cafe was published in 1951 after a five-year period of quiet. It was published in a large volume containing a group of selected short stories and the then published novels. Carson McCullers was again labeled a Gothic novelist, and the novel was denounced because of its preoccupation with grotesque situations and perverse characters. A few critics realized the depth of McCullers artistry.

A perceptive Time reviewer observed that the novel was written in the form of a fable.

This fable of love betrayed is told with quietness and simplicity. As in all of Novelist McCullers' work, there streaks through it a ribbon of sympathy for the shy and the lonely, the eccentrics who wait on the margins of life for a touch of love.1

But the reviewer was not perceptive enough to notice that McCullers' characters are not merely "lonely eccentrics" but are vivid symbols of the real world.

Another reviewer did realize the importance of her characterization. In a lengthy article, V. S. Pritchett wrote

1Time, LVII (June 4, 1951), 106.
... the moment she picks out her people, they are changed from the typical to the extraordinary. Like all writers of original genius, she convinces us that we have missed something which was plainly to be seen in the real world.

The Ballad of the Sad Cafe—the single-verse Poe-like title so filled with the dominant American emotion of nostalgia—make[s] an impact which recalls the impression made by such very different writers as Maupassant and D. H. Lawrence. What she has, before anything else, is a courageous imagination; that is to say one that is bold enough to consider the terrible in human nature without loss of nerve, calm, dignity or love.

To the continuing label of Gothicism, W. P. Clancy in Commonweal added a new distinction:

It seems to me that the Gothic label misses the essential point. Because Carson McCullers is ultimately the artist functioning at the very loftiest symbolic level, and if one must look for labels I should prefer to call her work "metaphysical."

Tennessee Williams wrote that The Ballad of the Sad Cafe is her greatest work and "is assuredly among the masterpieces of our language in the form of the novella."

Isolation, spiritual and moral, continued as the theme of The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. The "theme of moral isolation [was] presented in terms of social disunity and the wasted human effort to escape the loneliness which life itself imposes."

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Written in the style of the fable, the tale is as universal as the old English and American folk ballads about love, death, and revenge. This is not a realistic picture of Southern Main Street, but an intensified and universal record of the plight of all men. It tells in retrospect the plaintive story of the friction of a human triangle and of the failure of love.

The novel began with a description of the nameless, alienated town in which the drama was enacted:

The town itself is dreary, not much is there except the cotton mill, the two-room houses where the workers live, a few peach trees, a church with two colored windows, and a miserable main street only a hundred yards long. On Saturdays the tenants from the near-by farms come in for a day of talk and trade. Otherwise the town is lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world.

If you walk alone the main street on an August afternoon there is nothing whatsoever to do. The largest building, in the very center of the town, is boarded up completely and loans so far to the right that it seems bound to collapse at any minute.

These August afternoons—when your shift is finished there is absolutely nothing to do, you might as well walk down to the Falls and listen to the chain gang.

As in the previous novels, the action occurred in an isolated region, 'a place ... far off and estranged from all


other places in the world." The town was described during a period of intense heat and death-like stillness when natural alienation seemed greatest. The late Southern summer was also a symbol of alienation in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and especially in "The Member of the Wedding." The poverty of the mill workers, along with the description of the town and the August setting, served to strengthen the theme of spiritual and moral isolation.

The plot of the novel (Carson McCullers calls it a novella) revolved around a love triangle including Miss Amelia Evans, Cousin Lyman "Lillis," and Marvin Macu. At the center of this triangle was Miss Amelia:

She was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality. She might have been a handsome woman if, even then, she was not slightly cross-eyed. There were those who would have courted her, but Miss Amelia cared nothing for the love of men and was a solitary person.  

Miss Amelia's peculiar actions and strange physical appearance made her the focal point of all town gossips.

They remembered that "Miss Amelia had been born dark and somewhat queer of face, raised motherless by her father who was a solitary man, that early in youth she had grown to be six feet two inches tall which in itself is not natural for a woman, and that her ways and habits of life were too peculiar ever to reason about."  

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She lived on the main street in the old house that was later boarded up, and operated a general store on the first floor. In the back of the store was a small office in which she kept her records. From this office she administered her homemade medicines. Her cures were poor, and there was no disease she would not tackle with but one exception:

If a patient came with a female complaint she could do nothing. Indeed at the mere mention of the words her face would slowly darken with shame, and she would stand there craning her neck against the collar of her shirt, or rubbing her swamp boots together, for all the world like a great, shamed, humb-toed child.\(^\text{10}\)

Miss Amelia was totally self-sufficient and needed no one. "... the only use she had for other people was to make money out of them."\(^\text{11}\) It was rumored that she could have been an even richer woman, if she had not had such a passionate weakness for lawsuits:

It was said that if Miss Amelia so much as stumbled over a rock in the road she would glance around instinctively as though looking for something to sue about it. Aside from these lawsuits she lived a steady life and every day was very much like the day that had gone before.\(^\text{12}\)

"Miss Amelia's strange marriage reflected the isolated nature of her life:

her marriage had been unlike any other marriage ever contracted in this county—it was a strange

\(^{10}\text{Ibid., p. 12.}\)

\(^{11}\text{Ibid., p. 2.}\)

\(^{12}\text{Ibid., pp. 2-3.}\)
and dangerous marriage, lasting only for ten
days, that left the whole town wondering and
shocked. Except for this queer marriage,
Miss Amelia had lived her life alone.13

To the townspeople the marriage seemed an even stranger
match because of the particular man she married:

Marvin Macy was the handsomest man in this
region—being six feet one inch tall, hard-
muscled, and with slow gray eyes and curly
hair. He was well off, made good wages, and
had a gold watch which opened in the back to
a picture of a waterfall. From the outward
and worldly point of view Marvin Macy was a
fortunate fellow; he needed bow and scrape
to no one and always got just what he wanted.
But from a more serious and thoughtful view-
point Marvin Macy was not a person to be
cared for, for he was an evil character.14

Marvin Macy, the ten-day groom, had the worst reputation
in the area. In one pocket he carried the ear of a man killed
in a fight, and in the other a marijuana weed. He was the
type who killed small animals for sadistic pleasure. Women
were attracted to him, and it was reported that he had 'de-
graded and shamed' several of the young virgins in the vicin-
ity. He was one of six children who were deserted by their
parents. Though he was reared in the foster home of a good
woman, his cruel nature continued throughout his youth:

... the hearts of small children are delicate
organs. A cruel beginning in this world can
twist them into various shapes. The heart of a
hurt child can shrink so that forever afterward
it is hard and pitted as the seed of a peace.15

13Ibid., p. 2.
14Ibid., p. 19-20.
15Ibid., p. 21.
Marvin Macy was miraculously changed by his love for Miss Amelia. It reversed his character. His manners improved, he saved his wages, and he attended church regularly:

... at the age of twenty-two, this Marvin Macy chose Miss Amelia. That solitary, wistful, quizzical girl was the one he longed for. Nor did he want her because of her money, but solely out of love.16

No one could understand why 'Miss Amelia married' Marvin Macy, for it was evident that she did not love him. Both before and after the wedding she ignored him. Marvin Macy was ashamed in the eyes of the people, because he could not even get her to go to bed. He bought presents and assigned away all his property to her, but nothing helped. Finally, he left, and rumors drifted back to the town that he was serving a term in the state penitentiary for murder and robbery. Miss Amelia continued to live alone as before:

The town laughed a long time over this grotesque affair. But though the outward facts of this love are indeed sad and ridiculous, it must be remembered that the real story was that which took place in the soul of the lover himself. So who but God can be the final judge of this or any other love?17

Life reverted to normal for a few years until Cousin Willie Lyman came to town.

The man was a stranger, and it is rare that a stranger enters the town on foot at that hour. Besides, the man was a hunchback. He was scarcely

16Ibid., p. 20.

17Ibid., op. 24-25.
more than four feet tall and he wore a ragged, 
shabby coat that reached only to his knees. 
His crooked little legs seemed too thin to 
carry the weight of his great warped chest and 
the hump that sat on his shoulders. He had a 
very large head, with deep-set blue eyes and 
a sharp little mouth. His face was both soft 
and snarly—at the moment his pale skin was 
yellowed by lust and there were lavender [sic] 
shadows beneath his eyes. He carried a lopsided 
old suitcase which was tied with a rope. 18

The hunchback told Miss Amelia that he was kin to her and 
whined and begged to be taken into her home. At first, when 
it seemed that she was ignoring him, he sat down on the porch 
of the old house and cried. The townspeople laughed at the 
audacity of the hunchback in. felt confident that the woman 
who had ignored the handsomest man in those parts would surely 
ignore a repulsive cripple. One of those commented: "I’ll be 
damned if he ain’t a regular Morris Finestein." 19

Everyone nodded and agreed. For that is 
an expression having a certain special meaning. 
But the hunchback cried louder because he could not know what they were talking about. Morris 
Finestein was a person who had lived in the town 
years before. He was only a quick, skipping 
little Jew who cried if you called him Christ- 
killer, and ate light bread and canned salmon 
every day. A calamity had come over him and he 
had moved away to Society City. But since then 
if a man were prissy in any way, or if a man ever 
wept, he was known as a Morris Finestein. 20

The Jew is a universal symbol of all those who are home- 
less and unwanted. He is representative of the isolated

18Ibid., p. 4.
19Ibid., p. 5.
20Ibid.
traveller moving always through an alien environment. Like Morris Finstein, Cousin Lyan was isolated from the people by his peculiar physical appearance. The hunchback was a visible symbol of the alienation they felt but were unable to express.

Miss Amelia gave the hunchback a drink of her own whisky and fed him dinner. She prepared her father's old bedroom for him, and he stayed with her. Miss Amelia never mentioned her father to anyone else except Cousin Lyan. That was one of the ways in which she showed her love for him. 21 The townspeople were amazed, for a startling change came over Miss Amelia.

Outwardly she did not seem changed at all. But there were many who noticed her face. She watched all that went on, but most of the time her eyes were fastened lonelily on the hunchback.... She seemed to be looking inward. There was in her expression pain, perplexity, and uncertain joy....Her look that night, then, was the lonesome look of the lover. 22

The story line of the novel breaks as the storyteller, in an aside to the reader, tells about the nature of this peculiar love. The exposition begins: "Now some explanation is due for all this behavior." 23

First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons—but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a

21 Ibid., p. 27.
22 Ibid., p. 16.
23 Ibid., p. 19.
similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this. He feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing. He comes to know a new, strange loneliness and it is this knowledge which makes him suffer. So there is only one thing for the lover to do. He must house his love within himself as best he can to must create for himself a whole new inward world—a world intense and strange, complete in himself.

Now, the beloved can also be of any description. The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love. A man may be a sallowing great-grandfather and still love only a strange girl he saw in the streets of Cheeky one afternoon two decades past. The preacher may love a fallen woman. The beloved may be treacherous, greasy-headed, and given to evil habits. Yes, and the lover may see this as clearly as anyone else—but that does not affect the evolution of his love one whit.

Therefore, the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself.

It is for this reason that most of us would rather love than be loved. Almost everyone wants to be the lover. And the curt truth is that, in a deep secret way, the state of being beloved is intolerable to many. The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved. The lover craves any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain.24

In this treatise on the nature of love, the reasons for the actions of the characters become evident. Miss Amelia rejected Varwin Macy's love, because, as the lover, he sought to 'strip her bare' and make her subservient. She was strong.

24 This, op. 10 18.
and would not give in, for to her, the state of being loved was intolerable. Instead, she gave her love to another and repeated the hopeless cycle of the lover and the loved.

This situation is an extreme statement of the inability of man to end his isolation by the only method of escape, love. Why Marvin Macy chose Miss Amelia as a love object, or why Miss Amelia chose Cousin Lyman, cannot be explained. "The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love." In all ages, writers have realized that love is one of the most illogical and baffling of all experiences. Whether or not Miss Amelia, Marvin Macy, or Cousin Lyman are properly motivated is not a question at all, for the motivation for love is a mystery, hidden forever within the deep recesses of each man. This discussion on the nature of love is not only the basis of this novel, but also the basis of all of McCullers' work.

After Miss Amelia took Cousin Lyman into her home, a change came over the entire town. The hunchback persuaded her to convert the first floor general store into a cafe. "There were tables with cloths and paper napkins, colored streamers from the electric fans, great gatherings on Saturday nights."25 Over the years the cafe expanded and became the one spot where the lonely and downtrodden could meet to forget their troubles.

25Ibid., p. 2.
... on Sunday there would be an all-day camp meeting—and though that is a pleasure, the intention of the whole affair is to sharpen your view of Hell and put into you a keen fear of the Lord Almighty. But the spirit of a cafe is altogether different. Even the richest, greediest old rascal will behave himself, insulting no one in a proper cafe. And poor people look about them gratefully and pinch up the salt in a dainty and modest manner. For the atmosphere of a proper cafe implies these qualities: fellowship, the satisfactions of the belly, and a certain quainty and grace of behavior.26

The townspeople held great pride in the cafe, for there the hunger and injustice of the outside world was kept at bay. At the cafe the individual did not seem so cheap:

All useful things have a price, and are bought only with money, as that is the way the world is run. You know without having to reason about it the price of a bale of cotton, or a quart of molasses. But no value has been put on human life; it is given to us free and taken without being paid for. What is it worth? If you look at times the value may seem to be little or nothing at all. Often after you have sweated and tried and things are not better for you, there comes a feeling deep down in the soul that you are not worth much.

But the new pride that the cafe brought to this town had an effect on almost everyone.... There, for a few hours at least, the deep bitter knowing that you are not worth much in this world could be laid low.27

The cafe is one of the basic symbols of the novel. It is the place where all the people congregate to freely express themselves without loss of dignity.28 Through the doctrine of original sin, the church reminded them of their worthlessness.

26Ibid., p. 16. 27Ibid., p. 41.

but at the cafe they could forget the brutality and brevity of life in communion with their fellow men. In essence, the cafe did more to create the atmosphere of a real community than did the church.

At the cafe Miss Amelia served her own whisky:

For the liquor of Miss Amelia has a special quality of its own....It is known that if a message is written with lemon juice on a clean sheet of paper there will be no sign of it. But if the paper is held for a moment to the fire then the letters turn brown and the meaning becomes clear. Imagine that the whisky is the fire and that the message is that which is known only in the soul of a man—then the worth of Miss Amelia's liquor can be understood.29

But it was not the whisky alone that transformed the townspeople. The sense of fellowship sprang from the realization of the re-sexualized love Miss Amelia felt for the hunchback. To the people it seemed to be a strange, yet higher love, untainted by mere instinctive need or physical gratification.30

The warmth and companionship did not endure, for as the title implies, the place was destined to become a "sad" cafe. Things went well for seven years after Cousin Lyman's appearance; then Marvin Macy returned. It was late in autumn when he came back to the town. As he entered, Cousin Lyman spotted him and immediately fell in love. "The face of the hunchback was very pale as he watched the man down the road, and

29McCullers. The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, p. 6.
30Hassan, p. 325.
after a few moments he began to follow along carefully, keeping many paces away."31 The hunchback frantically wiggled his ears to attract the attention of Marvin Macy. "The hunchback was smiling at Marvin Macy with an entreaty that was near to desperation."32

Unseasonal things began to happen in the town:

Marvin Macy brought with him bad fortune, right from the first, as could be expected. The next day the weather turned suddenly, and it became hot. Even in the early morning there was a sticky sultriness in the atmosphere, the wind carried the rotten smell of the swamp, and delicate shrill mosquitoes weighed the green millpond. It was unseasonable, worse than August, and much damage was done.33

And later that winter an unheard of thing occurred:

People woke up on the second of January and found the whole world about them altogether changed. Little ignorant children looked out of the windows, and they were so puzzled that they began to cry. Old people harked back and could remember nothing in these parts to equal the phenomenon. For in the night it had snowed.34

With Carson McCullers’ fascination for that rare element, snow, it is a sure sign of some peculiar occurrence to come.

To Miss Amelia’s shock and embarrassment, Cousin Lyman began to follow Marvin Macy everywhere. The hunchback invited him to stay at the house, gave up his own bedroom, and yet

31McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Café, p. 35.
32Ibid., p. 36.
33Ibid., p. 38.
34Ibid., pp. 42-43.
Miss Amelia said nothing: "... she did not put Marvin Macy off the premises, as she was afraid that she would be left alone. Once you have lived with another, it is a great torture to have to live alone." The cafe stayed open, though the tension between the two enemies was great.

During the morning of the day of the fight, Cousin Lyman was anxious with anticipation. He looked about for something to do to occupy time. The old house had never been painted, so he got a bucket of green paint and went to work. "There was something childish about his satisfaction with his painting." He painted half of the porch and then switched to the walls. When he quit only a jagged portion of the wall and porch was painted. The job remained unfinished, suggesting that, even at its best, the cafe was incomplete. Among the isolated individuals who had not there, there had never been real communication. While it existed, the cafe had been the center of life for the whole town, a small replica of the incommunicable world. As in the instance of the piano tuning in The Member of the Wedding, the world appears unfinished, incomplete.

Finally after months of bitter tension, there was a fight between Miss Amelia and Marvin Macy. The fight took place in the cafe on the second of February, the day Cousin Lyman

[35]Ibid., p. 45.

[36]Ibid., p. 46.

painted the house. The whole town was there, for they instinctively knew that the time for a showdown had come. After half an hour of fighting, "Miss Amelia began to win. "At last she had him down, and strangled; her strong big hands were on his throat." 38

But at that instant, just as the fight was won, a cry sounded in the cafe that caused a shrill bright shiver to run down the spine. And what took place has been a mystery ever since. The whole town was there to testify what happened, but there were those who doubted their own eyesight. For the counter on which Cousin Lyman stood was at least twelve feet from the fighters in the center of the cafe. Yet at the instant Miss Amelia grasped the throat of Marvin Macy the hunchback sprang forward and sailed through the air as though he had grown hawk wings. He landed on the broad strong back of Miss Amelia and clutched at her neck with his clawed little fingers. 39

Marvin Macy and Cousin Lyman wrecked the cafe and left the town forever. Miss Amelia was beaten by the one person she loved. She was left alone again:

Miss Amelia let her hair grow ragged, and it was turning gray. Her face lengthened, and the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy. And those gray eyes—slowly day by day they were more crossed, and it was as though they sought each other out to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition. 40

The failure of love was repeated, for the beloved must of some strange necessity always destroy the lover. Cousin

38 McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, p. 50.
39 Ibid., pp. 50-51.
40 Ibid., p. 52.
Maya was a hunchback, a consumptive, and a homosexual.

Mervin Macy was sadistically cruel, and he never sweated, not even in August, and that surely is a sign worth pondering over. The outward abnormalities reflected the inner isolation of each.

After the cafe closed, the town returned to its former condition:

Yes, the town is dreary. On August afternoons the road is empty, white with dust, and the sky above is bright as glass. Nothing moves—there are no children's voices, only the hum of the mill. The peach trees seem to grow more crooked every summer, and the leaves are dull gray and of a sickly delicacy.

There is absolutely nothing to do in the town. Walk around the millpond, stand kicking at a rotten stump, figure out what you can do with the old wagon wheel by the side of the road near the church. The soul rots with boredom. You might as well go down to the Forks Falls highway and listen to the chain gang.

To the end of the novel is attached a segment entitled, "The Twelve Mortal Men." Three miles from the town on the Forks Falls highway, a chain gang is working. The men are shackled together, and they sing as they work:

The music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from the twelve men on the gang, but from the earth itself, or the wide sky. It is music that causes the heart to broaden and the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright. Then slowly the music will sink down until at last there remains one lonely voice, then a

41 Ibid., p. 39.
42 Ibid., p. 52.
great hoarse breath, the sun, the sound of the
picks in the silence.
And what kind of gang is this that can make
such music? Just twelve mortal men, seven of
them black and five of them white boys from this
county. Just twelve mortal men who are together.43

The twelve mortal men were imprisoned by the universal
fate of isolation. Though they were shackled together, as
all men are by mortality, they remained unable to communicate.
"There is paradox and irony in the fact that 'what joins
them together is exactly what keeps them apart.'"44 Their
singing is merely a temporary escape from an inescapable
loneliness. In its total effect, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe
is terrifying, for it seems that:

... an eternal flaw exists in the machinery
of love, which alone has the power to liberate
man from his fate of spiritual isolation. There
is no escape, and no hope of escape. You might
as well go and listen to the chain gang.45

43 Ibid., p. 54.
44 Oliver Evans, "The Theme of Spiritual Isolation in
Carson McCullers," New World Writing, I (New York, April,
1952), 347.
CHAPTER VII

THE ISOLATED INDIVIDUAL IN
CLOCK WITHOUT HANDS

After The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, ten years passed before Carson McCullers published another novel. During those years her paralysis slowed her work to a near standstill. Finally in 1961, she published Clock Without Hands. Fifteen years earlier she mentioned that she was working on a novel by that title, and when it was completed, her public was eager with anticipation. It was on the bestseller list a week before it was released by virtue of pre-publication sales.¹

In 1952 she went to a new doctor in desperation, for she felt that death was near. "Darling," McCullers said, "I have lost my soul." But the doctor convinced her that she had not, encouraged her writing, and became one of her best friends. "One page a day was all that I could do with one hand. And even that I owe to my doctor, Mary Mercer, to whom I dedicate my book."² The book was written in one year at the crippling rate of a page a day. One reviewer

²Ibid.
visited her in September of 1961 at the time of publication and found her "tall and frail, with closely cropped hair, gray-blue eyes and a gentle voice tinged with the South." 3

Twenty years did not change things among the critics, for Clock Without Hands was praised and attacked for the same reasons as the other novels. The old charges of strangeness, perversion, morbidity, and artificiality were revived. The Time reviewer stated: "Motivations are inept and mystifying. Her people are all of a piece or all in pieces." 4 This reviewer did not seem to realize that McCullers' characters are created incomplete. Spiritual isolation arises from the fact that creation is unfinished, and therefore man is estranged from God.

In The New York Times, Orville Prescott commented that the novel was full of "improbable situations," 5 yet he never once mentioned the words "lonely," "alienated," or "isolated." The dominant, recurring themes of moral and spiritual isolation were not discussed.

Tennessee Williams added the ultimate compliment:

If I hadn't known before that Carson is a worker of miracles, this work would surely have convinced me of it, for without any sign of the dreadful circumstances under which she accomplished it, this work was once again a thing set on paper as indelibly as if it had been carved onto stone. Here was all the stature, nobility of spirit, and

3 Ibid.
4 Time, LXXVIII (September 27, 1961), 118.
5 The New York Times, September 18, 1961, Sec. 1, p. 27.
profound understanding of the lonely, searching heart that make her, in my opinion, the greatest living writer of our country, if not of the world.6

Clock Without Hands is concerned with isolation in terms of death, the fear of approaching death, and the necessity of self-realization. The novel delivers "the message of Absolute Dread," as Tennessee Williams calls it, "an underlying dreadfulness of modern existence."7

The central character was J. T. Malone, a simple, ordinary man, neither perverted nor grotesque, but a respected pharmacist in Milan, Georgia, with a wife and two children. He was an honest, upstanding citizen of the community whose life had been filled with neither great joy nor deep pain. But things changed.

The novel begins:

Death is always the same, but each man dies in his own way. For J. T. Malone it began in such a simple ordinary way that for a time he confused the end of life with the beginning of a new season.8

Malone diagnosed his increasing lethargy as an unusually severe case of spring fever. After a trip to the doctor, the truth was known: he was dying of leukemia. His life was never again the same.


He was unable to think about the months ahead or to imagine death.

Afterwards he was surrounded by a zone of loneliness, although his daily life was not much changed.9

For a long time he told no one:

He did not tell his wife about his trouble because of the intimacy that tragedy might have restored. The passion of marriage had long since diminished to the preoccupations of parenthood.10

He was isolated from his family, so there was no one to share his burden with:

He lived now in a curious vacuum surrounded by the concerns of family life—the talk of high school proms, Tommy's violin recital, and a seven-tiered wedding cake—and the daily activities swirled around him as dead leaves ring the center of a whirlpool, leaving him curiously untouched.11

Since he could not relate to his family, Malone sought comfort in the church:

When tormented by the unreality of both death and life, it helped him to know that the First Baptist Church was real enough. The largest church in town, taking up half a city block near the main street, the property on offhand reckoning was worth about two million dollars. A church like that was bound to be real.12

One Sunday Dr. Watson delivered a sermon about 'the salvation that draws the bent on life.'13

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9Ibid., p. 9.
10Ibid.
11Ibid., p. 8.
12Ibid., pp. 9-10.
13Ibid., p. 10.
Malone sat stiff and listening and each moment he expected some personal revelation. But, although the sermon was long, death remained a mystery, and after the first elation he felt a little cheated when he left the church. How could you draw a bead on death? It was like aiming at the sky.14

The church failed, because it could offer him nothing concrete. It seemed to Malone that the church was for the living, not the dying:

... though Malone went every Sunday to church, and though they were holy men, in his judgement, he felt strangely apart from them. Though he shook hands with Dr. Watson at the end of every church service, he felt no communication with him, or any of the other worshipers.15

Because death weighed heavy, Malone went to talk to Dr. Watson. He asked the minister about the soul and after-life:

In church, and after twenty years of experience, Dr. Watson could make abstruse sermons about the soul; but in his own home, with only one man asking, his eloquence turned to embarrassment and he only said, "I don't know what you mean, Mr. Malone."

"Tell me, Dr. Watson," he asked, "what is eternal life?"

"To me," Dr. Watson said, "it is the extension of earthly life, but more intensified. Does that answer your question?"

Malone thought of the drabness of his life and wondered how it could be more intensified. Was afterlife continual tedium and was that why he struggled so in order to hold onto life? He shivered although the parsonage was hot.16

14Ibid., p. 10.
15Ibid., pp. 154-155.
16Ibid., pp. 155-156.
Malone left the passageway disappointed. He felt more isolated than ever, for the one man who should know about death failed him. Unable to communicate, J. T. Malone was forced to face death alone.

His days moved timelessly. Malone felt he blundered among a world of incongruities in which there was no order or conceivable design. He opened the pharmacy every day and went through the routines of life. One day as he sat at the counter compounding a prescription:

There was a footstep on the threshold and Malone was so suddenly unnerved that he dropped the pestle. The blue-eyed Negro stood before him, holding in his hand something that glinted in the sun. Again he stared into those blazing eyes and again he felt that look of eerie understanding and sensed that those eyes knew that he was soon to die.

Normally, Malone would have looked upon the blue-eyed Negro as an interesting freak; but because of his awareness of death, he saw the Negro as a threat. Malone had been an ordinary man; now he became grotesque. The stare of the blue eyes made him realize the full impact of his condition:

For the first time he knew that death was near him. But the terror that choked him was not caused by the knowledge of his own death. The terror concerned some mysterious drama that was going on—although what the drama was about Malone did not know. The terror questioned what would happen in those months—how long?

17Ibid., ch. 9.
18Ibid., op. 24-25.
that glared upon his numbered days. He was a man watching a clock without hands.19

When time ceased to have meaning, Malone felt he was a man isolated outside reality "watching a clock without hands." The everyday world stood apart, and he saw life with a new perspective. The vision scared him. The steady rhythm of a rat gnawing behind the wall broke the silence. "'Father, father, help me,' Malone said aloud. But his father had been dead for those long years."20 Malone's anguished cry is reminiscent of Christ's plea at crucifixion. "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" But to Malone, the father did not answer. As Carson McCullers points out in the incidents concerning the irrelevance of the church, God is inaccessible. In her teens, McCullers had read the parable of "the Madman" in which Nietzsche had written, "God is dead, ... for we have killed him." The earthly church was Malone's only access to God, and for Malone the church was dead. Like all men, Malone was destined to remain spiritually isolated.

Finally, Malone could no longer keep the secret of his illness from his wife. He dreaded telling her, for he realized that over the years they had grown further apart. Malone and Martha lived isolated from one another, and in telling her he realized their lack of closeness:

19Ibid., p. 25.
20Ibid.
Lodest, Victorian lady—almost sexless it had seemed to Malone at times. This lack of interest in sex had often made him feel gross, indelicate, almost uncoth. The final horror of the evening was when Martha unexpectedly, so unexpectedly, referred to sex. 21

Martha cried, and when she reminisced, the talk became maudlin:

He had run from his own house in terror and alarm, fleeing for comfort or solace anywhere. He had dreaded in advance the intimacy that tragedy might have restored from the distant casualness of his married life, but the reality of that soft summer evening was worse than any dread. 22

The wasted past began to haunt Malone, and he felt an overwhelming repulsion from life. Everyday intimacies became grotesque:

... he crept into the bed he shared with his wife. But when her warm buttocks touched his own, sick with the vibrance of their past liveliness, he jerked away—for how can the living go on living when there is death? 23

In his isolated world of timelessness, Malone began to dream of escape:

An ordinary, practical man who seldom daydreamed, he was daydreaming now that in the autumn he was going to a northern country, to Vermont or Maine where again he would see snow. He was going alone without Mrs. Malone. 24

Thinking of freedom was like thinking of snow. 25 Frankie, in The Member of the Wedding, longed to escape the oppressive

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21 Ibid., p. 47.  
22 Ibid., p. 46.  
23 Ibid., p. 69.  
24 Ibid., pp. 129-130.  
25 Ibid., p. 131.
Georgia summers and go to Alaska and see snow. And in her youth, McCullers left Georgia and went to New York in search of snow. The sun is a natural symbol of oppression and restriction, and the snow is a symbol of freedom and escape.

Malone continued to hope that either his disease was incorrectly diagnosed or that it was curable. He went to the hospital a second time but the verdict was the same. While in the hospital, he was confined to a bed for a number of days. An orderly wheeled a truck of books from bed to bed so that the patients could read. Malone's eyes were drawn to a book entitled Sickness unto Death. He opened the book at random and read. Some lines stuck in his mind, and he read them a second time:

The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed. If Malone had not had an incurable disease those words would have been only words and he wouldn't have reached for the book in the first place.  

He memorized the passage and his the book "for he did not want to share anything that was intimate with his wife." His thoughts turned to the past. "Unable to think of the reality of his own death, he was thrown back into the tedious labyrinth of his life. He had lost himself... he realized that surely. But how? When?"

26Ibid., p. 147.  
27Ibid., p. 150.  
28Ibid., p. 147.
After reading the passage from Søren Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*, Malone was haunted by the past. He realized that he had lost himself and that he was suffering the despair that is the sickness unto death. He tried frantically to make up for the lost years, but time was against him. He bought two new, expensive Hart, Schaffner, and Marx suits, though he knew he would get little use out of them. He went to the dentist and had costly bridges put on his teeth. "So dying, Malone took more care of himself than he had done in life." He "thought of all the life he had spent unlived. He wondered how he could die since he had not yet lived."

The months passed in that questioning way. Still he did not accept the diagnosis, so he went to Johns Hopkins. But the verdict was the same, and Malone went home in despair.

"In his limbo of waiting for death, Malone was obsessed with time." Malone was going through a time when he was often subject to fits of sudden rage. He could not think directly of his own death because it was unreal to him. But these rages, unprovoked and surprising even to himself, stormed frequently in his once calm heart.

These rages did not relieve him. When they were over, Malone was left with the feeling that something awful and incomprehensible was going to happen that he was powerless to prevent.

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29 Ibid., p. 151.
30 Ibid., p. 150.
32 Ibid., pp. 187-188.
Malone talked to only one person about his illness and approaching death. Judge Fox Malone, who had once been a member of the United States House of Representatives, and who was the leading citizen of the town, listened to Malone. The old Judge lied and told him that the diagnosis was ridiculous. But to himself he was truthful. "Poor J. T.," he said, "it's such a shocking thing."

Judge Malone talked of death and thought of his own ill health:

I, an old man, have expected death for fifteen years. But death is too cunning. When you watch for it and finally face it, it never comes. It corners around sideways. It slays the unaware as often as it does the ones who watch for it.

When asked by Malone if he believed in eternal life, the Judge answered:

"No, I don't believe in eternity as far as religion goes. I believe in the things I know and the descendants who come after me. I believe in my forebears, too. Do you call that eternity?"

"No one on this earth knows what death is really about." What the Judge dreaded was the blankness, so in a sense he did believe in eternity: "An infinite blankness and blankness where I'd be all by myself. Without loving or eating or nothing. Just lying in this infinite blankness and

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33Ibid., p. 23.  
34Ibid., p. 20.  
36Ibid., p. 172.
darkness. But the Judge could not imagine his own death:

It was inconceivable to him that he would actually die. He would live to a hundred years if he kept to his diet and controlled himself....

No. It was immortality he wanted. Immortality like Shakespeare, and if "push came to shovel," even like Ben Jonson. In any case he wanted no ashes and just for Fox Clane.

The expectancy of death subdues the desire to live and causes man to dread existence. Death ends life and calls it.

This discussion of death made Judge Clane uneasy, and he thought about his dead son, Johnny:

He was the son of a rich man, fortune's darling, blessed in all ways, at the threshold of a great career. That boy could have been President—he could have been anything he wanted. Why should he die?

It seemed to the Judge that his boy had had all that a young man could desire: wealth, a law degree, a beautiful wife, and a baby. Johnny Clane committed suicide because of a lost court case in which he defended a Negro man charged with rape. "Mad. Sad. Cheated. When I think of my son I often feel so....We were more like brothers than father and son. Blood twin brothers," said the Judge. He deceived himself into thinking that he and his son were close. The Judge would not recognize the alienation that grew up between them.

37Ibid., p. 173. 38Ibid., p. 96.

Once during a heated argument between the two, Johnny shouted at his father, "I never wanted to be your son."  

When the Judge himself realized the widening difference between his son and himself, he harped on the father-son theme even more than ever, as though words could turn the wish into reality.  

Judge Clane was eighty-five years old and, like Carson McCullers, had suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed. His left hand was puffy and useless, and a limp slowed him down. His weight posed a problem, and he was on a constant diet. He was lonely, for he confessed to Malone:  

... since my dear wife's death I've been so much alone."

"You can be the most revered citizen in town, or in all the state, and still feel alone. And be alone, by God!"

The Judge attempted to escape his old-age loneliness by devising a ridiculous plan for redemption of Confederate money.  

All that Judge Clane had left was his grandson, John Jester Clane:  

He was a slight limber boy of seventeen with auburn hair, and a complexion so fair that the freckles on his upturned nose were like cinnamon sprinkles over cream. The glare brightened his red hair, but his face was shadowed and he shielded his wine-brown eyes against the

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41 Ibid., p. 187.
42 Ibid., p. 188.
43 Ibid., pp. 127-128.
glare. He wore blue jeans and a striped jersey, the sleeves of which were pushed back to his delicate elbows.44

Jester was a lonely adolescent searching for his identity:

"This summer I've been very—" Jester was going to say 'I've been very lonely, but he could not bring himself to admit this truth aloud'.45

His mother died in childbirth, and his father committed suicide before the boy's birth. Lately, he began to question his grandfather's reactionary political views, and the two became alienated from each other.

For Jester, adolescence was a time of great insecurity. He could not decide whether to become a pianist or an airplane pilot, for he loved both. Like Nick Kelly and Frankie Addams, Jester was indecisive about his own sex. For one year he secretly loved Ted Hopkins, the best all-round athlete in the high school. "Jester would seek Ted's eyes in the corridor and although his pulses pounded, they only spoke to each other twice in that year."46

Ted was the son of an army officer who was stationed in a town fifteen miles from Milan, so this love was shadowed by the thought that his father would be transferred. And his feelings, furtive and secret as they were, were intensified by the menace of separation and the aura of distance and adventure.47


46 Ibid., p. 42. 47 Ibid., p. 43.
Like many of McCullers' characters, Jester longed for love, not to be loved, but to love. 49 Again, the love object was an impossible one.

About this love, Jester felt guilt and shame:

He was afraid, so terribly afraid, that he was not normal and that fear cork-screwed within him.

If it turned out that he was homosexual like men in the Kinsey Report, Jester had vowed that he would kill himself. 49

The problem troubled Jester so much that he decided to lose his virginity. One night he forced himself to visit Reba, the prostitute, and prove his manhood:

... yearning to lust and be normal he could only see the gooey lipstick and the vacant smile. And the orange-haired lady he had slept with last night was not a bit "jewel-eyed."

Secretly Jester thought sex was a fake, but this morning, now that he had become a man, he felt cocksure and free. 50

These questions that haunt the adolescent heart, "Who am I? What am I? Where am I going?," plagued Jester. They created an insecurity that made him dread even his own existence. In his daydreams, Jester escaped the lonely summer world of Milan, Georgia. "His dreams were nearly always in foreign countries. Never in Milan, never in Georgia, but always in Switzerland or Bali or somewhere." 51 He dreamed

49 McCullers, Clock Without Hands, pp. 92-93, 94.

50 Ibid., p. 93.

51 Ibid., p. 203.
of saving Marilyn Monroe from an avalanche and of receiving a hero's ticker tape parade down the streets of New York City. Jester's other cross was that of saving his friend Sherman Pew from a met and losing his own life while Sherman looked on, broken with grief. 52

Sherman Pew was a blue-eyed Negro boy about Jester's age. It was he who had frightened J. T. Malone in his pharmacy. He was an orphan who did not know the identity of either his mother or father. When they met, Sherman explained to Jester:

"The sober ice-cold truth is, I don't know anything about them. I was left in a church pew and therefore I was named Pew, in that somewhat Negroid and literal manner, according to the Nigerian race." 53

Sherman was isolated from both the Negroes and the whites. Because of his affected speech (as can be seen in the above quotation), the whites thought of him as an "uppity nigger." Sherman's feelings about white people were the same:

All Sherman's life he had thought that all white men were crazy, and the more prominent their positions the more lunatic were their words and behavior. In this matter, Sherman considered he had the sober ice-cold truth on his side. 54

He was not a member of the Negro community either, for he did not act and talk as they did. Verily, the Judge's maid told Sherman:

52Ibid., p. 203.  
53Ibid., pp. 66-67.  
54Ibid., p. 163.
"Just because you have them blue eyes is no reason to act so high and mighty. You nigger like the rest of us. You just had a white pappy who passed on them blue eyes to you, and that's nothin to put on airs about. You nigger like the rest of us."\(^{55}\)

Like Honey Brown in The Member of the Wedding, Sherman was forced to live in isolation outside both worlds.

Sherman was employed in the services of Judge Clane as an amanuensis, and was pampered because of his secretarial abilities. The Judge busied Sherman with insignificant letters, mixing noon drinks, and reading poetry. Jester loved Sherman and tried to become close to him, but Sherman returned the love with indifference. Jester was the only white person that Sherman could speak harshly to. Again the loved one revolted against the lover, for the act of being loved was unbearable.

Because he had no parents, Sherman created fantasies in which he imagined his mother to be some famous Negro entertainer who had been raped by a white man. He wrote letters to Marian Anderson that were never answered. Finally he discovered the truth in some old papers belonging to the Judge:

\[\ldots\] there was a man of his own race whom the Judge had had executed, and his name was Sherman. And there was a white woman who was accused of fumng the Negro. He could not believe it. Could he ever be sure? But a white woman, blue eyes, was all so otherwise than he had dreamed. It was like some eerie, agonizing crossword puzzle. And he, Sherman . . . Who am I? What am I?\[\ldots\]

\(^{55}\)Ibid., p. 105.
No, Marian Anderson had not been his mother, nor Lena Horne, nor Beegie Smith, nor any of the honeyed ladies of his childhood. He had been tricked. He had been cheated. He wanted to die like the Negro man had died.56

The knowledge made Sherman violent. He felt he had been cheated and that he had to do something, do something, do something."57

At this point in the novel, an outside force alters the lives of the four people. It was the summer of 1954, and the United States Supreme Court handed down its decision in the now-famous school desegregation case, "Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas." And Sherman "did something." He moved into a poor white neighborhood, and the town was in turmoil. Jester tried to warn him of the danger, but he would not listen. The house was bombed, and Sherman was killed. He had "wanted to die like the Negro man."

Judge Clane helped organize the bombing, but accepted none of the responsibility of Sherman's death. When the Court's decision was announced, the Judge decided to speak on the radio attacking the court:

... although he had tried to make up a speech on the way to the station, he had not been able to. The ideas were so chaotic, so inconceivable, he could not formulate his protests...Words—vile words, curse words unsuitable for the radio—raging in his mind. But no historic speech. The only thing that came to him was the first speech he had memorized in law school.58

56Ibid., pp. 211-212.  
57Ibid., p. 212.  
58Ibid., p. 242.
In desperation, he quoted the "Gettysburg Address." Unable to communicate, the senile, old Judge was left stranded in an alien world. The world he had known no longer existed, and he was left alone with a broken dream.

J. T. Malone was profoundly affected by Sherman's act of defiance. A group of saboteurs met in Malone's pharmacy to plan Sherman's death. When he told the group that he would not take part in the murder, Malone learned what it meant to live. And in learning to live, he learned to die.

He no longer confused the end of life with the beginning of a new season....He looked at nature now and it was part of himself. He was no longer a man watching a clock without hands. He was not alone, he did not rebel, he did not suffer. He did not even think of death these days. He was not a man dying... nobody died, everybody died... He no longer thought about the zones of loneliness that had so bewildered him. His life was strangely contracted.

...in dying, living assumed order and a simplicity that Malone had never known before. The pulse, the vigor was not there and not wanted. The design alone emerged. 59

For the first time in her novels, McCullers presents an individual who triumphs over isolation. J. T. Malone (M—alone, the symbolism of the name is evident) was the only character who was able to escape isolation. Malone chose morality rather than violence. By rejecting violence, he became a moral man able to rise above death. "When man can turn out of himself to others he can escape spiritual loneliness, whatever

59 Ibid., pp. 236, 241.
his isolation may be. Malone surmounted isolation through moral involvement. At the close of the novel, he was at peace with his soul, in harmony with life. Jesus' words of assurance are particularly applicable: "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it." This paradox was illustrated by Malone, in whom death and life were united, and life triumphed over death.

In contrast, the old Judge lost his life by refusing to become morally involved. His increasing senility and his inability to act morally in a given situation, doomed his chances of escaping isolation. Judge Clane is death in life.

All four of the characters attempted to escape their isolation through fantasy. Malone dreamed of snow; the Judge sought to occupy his lonely old age with visions of a new South through the redemption of Confederate money; Jester dreamed of himself as a hero; and Sherman imagined that his mother was a famous Negro entertainer. Through illusion, each was able to ignore the reality of his own isolation.

Because of their illusions, all four characters appear as incomplete creations. Each character lived in despair fearing death, the inevitable isolation. To live, says McCullers, one must accept death, for to ignore death is to refuse life. Only Malone is saved.

CHAPTEH VIII

CONCLUSION

The theme of isolation in some degree is drawn through every character in every novel by Carson McCullers. The inability of these characters to escape isolation causes them to deliver a total message of the absolute dread of existence. As a person and as an artist, Carson McCullers has known isolation:

The function of the artist is to execute his own indigenous vision, and having done that, to keep faith with this vision . . . once a creative writer is convinced of his own intentions, he must protect his work from alien persuasion. It is often a solitary position. We are afraid when we feel ourselves alone. And there is another special fear that torments the creator when he is too long assailed.

For the parallel function of a work of art is to be communicable. Of what value is a creation that cannot be shared? The vision that blazes in a madman’s eyes is valueless to us. So when the artist finds a creation rejected there is the fear that his own mind has retreated to a solitary uncommunicable state. ¹

All men are isolated because of the physical separateness of each individual. It is a strange phenomenon that every man can function physically without the need of other men, and that each single human organism is a world complete in itself. The natural separateness tends to alienate man

from his society, as each creates an impenetrable world within himself.

Though the characters are grotesque, they are merely symbols of the real and visible world. They are intensified extensions of everyman. Their physical peculiarities reflect the inner isolation of each. John Singer is a mute; Diff Brannon is sexless; Berenice Sadie Brown has one blue glass eye; Nick Kelly and Frankie Adams are overgrown; Honey Brown and Sherman Pew are mulattoes; Amelia Evans is a giantess; and Cousin Lyman is a hunchback. Their bodies are distorted, symbolizing their distorted souls.

Though the characters are isolated, they express a burning need to communicate. In The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, each tries desperately to communicate with a deaf-mute with unsuccessful results. Captain Penderton, in Reflections in a Golden Eye, attempts to make Private Williams aware of his feelings. Again communication fails. After a lengthy conversation in The Member of theWedding, Frankie Adams admits that she never could say what she wanted to. With one exception, all the characters in all the novels remain imprisoned within the walls of self.

The problems of existence can be neither understood nor vocalized. Their isolation arises from an inability to comprehend the basic questions of existence: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Because these questions cannot be answered, they create an insecurity that makes each character dread his existence.
They are morally isolated because of self-interest. Their egocentric natures result in a desire to obtain love only for themselves, and their world provides a one-sided concept of brotherly love. They are spiritually isolated because of an inability to communicate with a being larger than themselves. In all of the novels, both God and the Church are strangely silent. None of the characters has any concept of a spiritual origin of love. For them, the Church is a failure, and God is dead.

Though love always fails, it is the only hope for man. Equal love does not exist, explains McCullers, for there is always a lover and a loved one. The lover is isolated, even in love, for he is the only one who expresses this emotion. McCullers says the lover seeks "to strip the loved one bare." The loved one finds the relationship intolerable and destroys it.

The characters seldom perceive the complexities of their love situations. Nevertheless, they feel the stings of this unrequited love. Those who do realize the problem are left in even greater despair. At the close of The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Biff Brannon understood the wretched helplessness of his state. He saw life suspended between two opposing worlds of radiance and darkness, and he was torn between bitter irony and faith. Unable to understand the riddle of existence, he saw life as a meaningless, ugly joke. All of McCullers' characters were possessed with
a hunger for something beyond the commonplace and with a loneliness they could not quell. Like Biff Brannon, each felt that he had been cheated.

There was only one character who did escape isolation. In the last novel, Clock Without Hands, J. T. Malone learned to live by accepting death. Malone made the moral decision not to murder, shortly before he himself was to die. His escape from isolation was not total, for soon even he was isolated in death. He never understood the complexities of love or experienced the fullness of the unisolated life. His escape is a paradox, for in escaping the isolation of life he assumed the isolation of death.
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